

**In Light of the Last**

In Light of the Last  
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*This is a work of fiction.*

**Any resemblance of the characters depicted  
herein to real persons is entirely unintentional.**

*For my Family  
and  
my Friends.*

*You know who you are.*







## Prologue

There have always been Mysteries. There have been mysterious differences perceived between ourselves that were believed to be insurmountable. Oh their skin is dark, they're probably a runaway slave we should catch them. Oh he's gay, beat the shit out of him. Oh she's transgendered, let's strip her and find out. Oh ze's a drug addict, let's lock ze up and throw away the key. Where there is an absence of Truth, there can only exist the unknown. But what is unknown should not immediately imply fear, hatred, or animosity. If only this very basic fact could have been properly construed throughout all of Human history, by all Humans everywhere, then perhaps the conflicts arising from what actually amount to trivial differences between us, The Human Race – all of us – could have been prevented. But of course, I know nothing turned out this way at all.

It is actually the case that, for all our powers of cognition, Humans respond pejoratively to contradictory elements. Conveyed most clearly: it has always been apparent that Humans, as they cut down the soldier threatening their life, as they sign the death warrant for a criminal, as they press down the plunger of a lethal injection, that, not only is the figure beneath their blade, their pen, their needle, also another Human, but that this Human has somehow engaged in behavior that is incompatible with the world as they believe it should be. If only they could have understood that all behavior is contradictory, all intention is meaningless, all righteousness is baseless, all hopes are contrived, all desire is selfish, all faith is false.

What would all this say, then, about how we treat each other? What would this say, then, about how we have built our families, our homes, our cities, our thrones? I still believe that we continue to be nothing but horrific in more ways than one. Much of what you believe and most likely will continue to believe does, in some way or another, incite and reinforce Human cruelty. But, maybe there is a way out. Maybe there is something we can do to save ourselves from what is, at this point, the only logical finale to our way of life, this being a mass annihilation. What would the solution be? – I wonder.

I have come to the following conclusions:

(1) We must defeat the notion that the total removal of inter-Human categorization is idealistic. Not only is it not idealistic, but tribal or behavioral categorization, that is, the creation of contrived distinctions between those of the same species, is the logical equivalent of potentially justifying that one Human Life takes precedence over another Human's.

(2) We must defeat the notion that removal of our tribal instincts is idealistic. What point is there in having cognition if we don't have any ability to modify our behavior? The belief that we cannot moderate our instincts is illogical, and I believe would be immediately equivalent to the devaluation of a cognitive consciousness itself. *Cogitamus, ergo sumus.* (*We think, therefore we are*).

(3) We must defeat the notion that categorization does not immediately imply eugenics. To assert otherwise is illogical. Eugenics and genocide do not begin from the statement, "Some Humans are better or have greater worth than others." The mass movements of eugenics and genocide logically begin from the statement, "there are categorical differences between Humans." If you believe that evaluative categories exist which justify unequal treatment between Humans, you are an accomplice to murder.

(4) We must defeat the notion that assessing categorization using the above reasoning immediately implies the devaluation of different cultures and viewpoints. It is likely the methodology will accomplish the complete opposite. By affirming the value inherent in every one of us, the value of individual cultures and mindsets is magnified exponentially.

(5) We must defeat the notion that this reassessment of categorization justifies criminality and heinous acts of cruelty against other beings. If we think critically about it, what would likely happen is a reformatting of our laws and regulations with a better awareness of Crime and Punishment in and of itself. For example, in no world of objective critical thinkers could it ever make sense that someone going to prison for theft should also be there with someone who has committed murder. For all we know, a thief, whose life would otherwise be compromised without the theft, could grow into the greatest thinker or leader the world has ever known. Many of the people you look up to each day in business and government – it is likely they too have committed heinous acts of Deathmaking that are beyond your comprehension. Many of the people who are convicted as murderers have just as much ability to influence this world as you do – it seems likely that the most dangerous murderers live in the comforts

of their own home, have families, and have the outward appearance of being productive members of society. The essential question is, has the individual already resolutely declared through their actions their lack of respect for Human Life itself? And even then, do we consider them criminals? The people we convict for murder, are they the ones that have murdered the most? If it were the case that a large group of people is turned into “criminals,” if our society is composed such that so many must commit deleterious acts against other people, then that is what we deserve, as an entire Humanity, for not doing a better job helping Humans integrate into the society in which they were born without anyone asking whether they wanted to be there in the first place.

We must not neglect something called The Human Spirit. This Spirit is the envelopment of all Human Potential: dreams, wants, hopes...it is the force created within us, our having been mustered up from lifeless stuff and transformed into beings that could be aware of themselves. There are forces greater than Humans – forces that have allowed us to have the sense that we can take control of our destinies. By any reasonable evaluation, such a sense of purpose is nothing more or less than the greatest gift that the Universe, the Elements, and the Forces of Nature have bequeathed to all of us. This understanding of the equality of the Human Spirit, despite what seems to be ever-present danger, could allow us to live and prosper with perpetual humility and respect for one another. This would be a sensibility generated by the acute awareness of the fact that our mutual insignificance is of the greatest significance, our lack of worth is truly worthwhile, and our insubstantial nature is the most substantial Truth.





## Part One: Aiu<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One World Speech for “to meet.”



For some reason I can't stop seeing Death in my mind almost every day of my life.

I've never thought to ask anyone about whether they too experience this. For me, it manifests itself as something like a vision of a roiling sea of corpses, rising up in waves of shimmering grey ghostly moaning mouths begging to be remembered; a type of mind that, through the perfect imperfect arrangement of chemicals, unfolds within a body, unbidden.

I don't think it's a form of loneliness, or insanity, or anything you think it is. I believe it results from not being alone – from the implication of being forced into choosing to be a part of someone else's life. It is the burden and the cost of such selfishness. Even as I write now, I want to weep in the face of what I can clearly see is the futility of Behavior – what an ungracious and ingratiating charge to bear!

Sometimes I would lay in bed at night when I was younger and wonder why it seemed no one else had these thoughts running through their head. What I didn't realize at the time was, all Humans, no matter who they are, end up with thoughts that will be, if they aren't already, recognizably some form of what used to be called "manic-depression." It's just that some people exhibit signs of it earlier.

And everyone experiences it differently. Some after being bullied for the first time, or maybe the 100th time. Some after taking a ring, not knowing what is brighter, the smile or the band. Some after seeing a casket lying silent in the bare earth. Some after experiencing throes of pleasure with someone they realize no longer makes them feel the way they used to.

And I think in the end, these thoughts, in combination with all other stimuli a Human must face each day – sexuality, hunger, thirst... – we inevitably seek catharsis. There are many that don't make it, never find out their place in this world till they've shot themselves or someone else up. Tied a rope around their neck. Tied it around someone else's. I think it is an absolute joke that we do not take seriously the volitional end of all these stimuli - dissociating from them completely - as a solution to what is really so very painful: an experience interspersed with only fleeting moments of happiness and pleasure.

Does it not make perfect sense then that someone would want to disappear, not only in moments of deep dysphoria, but also in moments of pure bliss?

Riding a bike fast downhill, eyes closed, the sun shining through with blisteringly beautiful rainbow flashes - and disappear. Lying on a comfy sofa and



stretching out to feel all the muscles in your body pull, perhaps thinking, “ah, this feels damn good...” – and disappear.

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I think what people do not understand about drugs, and this reasoning comes after extensive observations of “drug culture’s” interaction with the rest of society, is that addiction to them involves an extensive web of what we might call “mental tricks.” When one engages with more vivid manifestations of pathways already delicately existent in the brain, one is faced with repercussions that are given many names. I call them trickery.

The best example I can give you, and it is indeed the closest I’ve ever run to True Danger, is Sweet. You can think of the True Danger as crossing into a zone within your mind wherein you are no longer able to see through the trickery on your own. You need extensive help to break out, but as I write this, it remains unclear where this help comes from. If I were to say it comes from within, then I would be resigning a lot of people I know to death. If I were to say it comes from without, I would be resigning them to maybe a fate worse than death.

You see, it is not so much the effects of the drug that comprise the trickery, it’s what the drug has done to your reasoning. Months, even years after getting your last high, you’ll be questioning whether or not it was the right decision, whether or not it actually is as bad for your health as you think, that the only way for you to feel excited and full of well-being again is to get it inside. But it’s a trick you’re playing on yourself. There isn’t anyone or anything else trying to trick you besides your own mind. Logic breaks down and during moments when you think you’d find some peace – masturbation, reading, drinking coffee, chillin’ at a BBQ – you’ll be faced with some smell, some alert, something will tickle your mind and force you to inject the memory of the high into your present action. And I think awareness and mindfulness of these tricks is the only way to really stay healthy, and stay away from what actually ends in Self-enslavement. It will certainly be many years before I truly feel the lure of the Sweet behind me. In my heart I know it will eventually fade as with all bad memories and most desires one feels in the bosom of the young self. But I won’t lie and say that there will ever come a time when I can stop being vigilant of the True Danger. As of my telling you this, I’m not completely sure that time will ever come.

I have friends who have already crossed into the True Danger, and even now they are still not in The Clear - if you can even call it "The Clear." I think ultimately the greater part of my reasons for telling you this is to remind *myself* of my own nearness to what would inevitably be my undoing. But I think I also need to say these things because Humanity at large has a horrifying fundamental misunderstanding of drug addiction and drug addicts. Modern society's relationship with substances is very unhealthy and unreasonable. It has yet to make any sense to me why people smoking marijuana would be considered negatively and someone popping an incredibly strong anti-depression med in the morning would not be.

In any case, as a self-described pragmatist, I don't really think it matters in the end whether or not the double standard is defeated. Humans need tools and learning to deal with treacherous self-inflicted trickery of all kinds; without this education, we will surely do ourselves in eventually. Because, if you think critically about it, the Self-awareness required to defeat drug addiction would require the same amount to, say, truly internalize different political opinions, or seriously consider the validity of other cultures. We spin webs of lies within ourselves that cause many of the conflicts you see today. I would even go so far as to say the puzzle of "World Peace" is not solved by external cooperation, but by collective internal reformation of socio-cultural tenets. But you and I don't live in a world where Self-awareness is extensive, and as such, I've had and will have to make do.

.....

"Dude, I could've copped today..."

Xiem<sup>2</sup> looked up as Risam said this, gazing up into a stupidly gleeful face. Or was that pride?

"But I ended up not getting it. So fuck you for thinking I would cop." Risam was talking in a sarcastically angry voice.

Xiem actually hadn't said anything in a while about Risam copping because he had largely given up on trying to get him to drop the Dope habit. But he was glad nevertheless that there was some Self-control within his friend, even if it was incredibly deep down and hard to find.

Xiem sat on the edge of the second story of the dilapidated building they had met up in after completing the day's tasks, swinging his legs back and forth like a kid on a bus whose feet don't reach the floor yet.

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<sup>2</sup> 'X' in One World Speech is normally pronounced like a throaty "ch," but in Xiem's name, it is more like "she-em."

“So, Xiem, any words of praise?” Xiem didn’t realize he hadn’t replied.

“I’m proud of you Ris, but the real challenge is obviously just beginning for you.” Risam spat at the comment, the fluid just missing Xiem’s cheek, cascading towards the ground below. Xiem was always saying annoying shit like that.

“C’mon fuckface, you know I did good.” Xiem said nothing, and instead chose to look back towards the sun dipping below the visible edge of the tree tops a little ways ahead.

“I’m trying to think Ris, please be quiet.” Xiem was getting nervous because no one else had arrived yet. Risam gave the finger to the back of Xiem’s head and turned around to look at the interior of the room with the hole in the side, as if someone had taken a huge bite out of it.

“Aren’t you a little bit worried that no one’s arrived yet, Ris?” Xiem was anxious but he didn’t let his voice betray how he felt.

“Not really. We’ve finished earlier than the rest of the Squad on the most recent missions. They probably just got held up with whatever they’ve been tasked with.” Xiem glanced at his myPhone. The time read 18:40. Sunset was supposed to be in around 30 minutes from now.

After a few moments Hanu emerged from the trees with Yukiko at his side. Xiem knew who they were only due to the descriptions he had been given through the Song app. No profile pictures were allowed. He reminded himself, however, he’d have to pay attention to how people talked because descriptions alone were not a very secure way of identifying people.

“Look, Ris. I think that’s Hanu and Yukiko,” Xiem murmured over Risam’s messing around with some of the failing woodwork. The pair continued to get closer to the building. Just as he said he would be, Hanu was tall with a somewhat stout build, long crazy hair and mane-like beard. Yukiko was slighter but not extensively, hair dyed shiny brunette, a southern Japonic islander with dark suntanned skin. They looked like they had walked a long way, although no one was supposed to be coming from further than a five mile radius on foot.

“Oy! You guys up there. I’m supposing you are Xiem and Risam?” Hanu had a distinct French accent speaking English. He wasn’t using One World Speech.

Xiem nodded his head, and, trying not to be rude by staying silent, yelled down to them, “Pleasure to finally meet in person. There are some stairs in the back of the house, or you could just climb up the side if you wanted I guess...” Xiem watched as the couple deliberated in whispers, then entered the house. He heard them creaking around downstairs - apparently they wanted to

look around first before coming up to the broken bedroom. At least, he thought it had been a bedroom.

The sun had dipped completely below the treetops now. The others were really late, and they'd have even more difficulty finding this spot after dark. Not that it mattered to Xiem, the meetup was an anomaly in the context of the missions they'd been given in the past. It was really nothing like the ones that had come before at all. Risam sat fiddling with his myPhone in the corner a little ways from where Xiem sat.

"Aren't you worried the floor over there is gonna give way?" Risam asked without looking up from the phone. Xiem said nothing, he was more worried that the rest had bailed.

After about half an hour, as the twilight settled in deeper, four more figures emerged from the forest. Jamuklé, Wilson, Lamli and Günter trudged forward each looking weary, as one does when faced with an almost impossible task, suddenly finding it over as quickly as it began, leaving one perplexed as to what the process had been. Xiem could immediately tell who Lamli was because the neutral gender always had a remarkably ambiguous appearance. Wilson was the only person from what had been called Asia...and Günter said he was tall, so Jamuklé must be the scraggly one remaining.

Each of them was about 24-25, same as Xiem and Risam. Hanu and Yukiko were the oldest, probably around 28. Age never really mattered to Xiem though. After a certain point, people tended not to change so much unless faced with extreme circumstances.

"Oy!! Welcome to you all," Xiem's blue eyes beamed down on them, genuinely thankful they were now all assembled.

Xiem decided to add a, "Glad you could make it...I was getting ready to head home myself."

"Oh yah? Where's home for you?" Jamuklé yelled up in a mocking tone. Xiem said nothing.

Personal information was not meant to be given carelessly. Instead, he edged back away from the hole in the room and joined Risam who was now shaking hands with Hanu and Yukiko. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance, and a background chorus of nightbugs began to sing around the troupe, now all gathered in the upstairs room.

Risam went over to his pack and pulled out an electric lantern, mosquito incense and tray, as well as a torch lighter, the kind one might use to

ignite a cigar. Then, he deftly lit the mosquito incense and placed it in the tray, as the rest of the group watched in solemn silence.

“Why’d you think to bring that?” Jamuklé’s accent was hard to place, he was probably from somewhere in what used to be called the United States.

“I knew we’d be spending some time outside, and, seeing as we’re not meeting in a room without a hole in it, it seems I made a good decision, no?”

Jamuklé just snorted derisively and shot a glance over at Lamli. Ze smiled and shrugged z’s shoulders.

“Now then, I’m sure we’re all very ready to hear why we were instructed to gather here like this,” Günter wanted to get things moving, apparently.

“It would be nice if we could be given Squad Leader’s instructions now, please.” He looked over at Xiem, their eyes met, and Xiem looked away instinctively. He didn’t like people looking into his eyes for too long. But also Günter was attractive...brown hair cropped short to the scalp, muscular but of slight build, like all assembled, as if none of them ate properly but walked around a lot. Xiem cleared his throat and pulled himself back together.

“Okay, just a moment...” Xiem pulled his myPhone out of his pocket and placed it on the floor. “If you would all please be seated.” Such was the custom when engaging the holographic transmission feature of the Song app. The viewer was only able to see in 360 degrees level to a few feet above the device in use. Squad Leader also demanded deference in any case. Each of them sat down cross legged around the myPhone. The anticipation in the air was so thick, Xiem felt he could almost taste it...or was that the mosquito incense?...

He tapped on the Song app icon and waited for it to load. Then, hesitating for just a moment, tapped on the screen to call Squad Leader. The screen flashed to black and then displayed a circular loading bar of small gold boxes. A little light spun around within the boxes indicating the connection was successful and was now waiting for the receiving party to pick up.

The call connected, and a lifelike but clearly computerized voice sounded through the hi-fi speaker, “Hello, Xiem. Please identify yourself with the verbal password you set 150 days ago.” The security system was so annoying. One had to set a new password every month, but each password from a year past was kept on file and the request could be any one of them. Xiem looked around, each of the group members looked at him expectantly. It wasn’t like he was the leader or anything, any of them could have called up Squad Leader. They just didn’t want to have to deal with the stupid password control system.

Xiem thought back to 5 months ago, or really, five passwords ago, and intoned clearly, “Anything will burn you if hot enough. Anything will pierce you if sharp enough.”

“One moment please.” The golden disconnected boxes now formed a solid slowly pulsating ring.

“Why do you always choose such fucked up passwords Xi?” Risam, who had been working with Xiem for a while now, had heard a lot of them before. Xiem merely smiled, like a little kid who is too shy to talk, or hasn’t learned yet the custom of how to reply to a compliment.

“Password approved. You’ve entered the hologram server. Total participants including yourself: two.” The screen faded to black again, and the myPhone engaged its hologram producers as well as the 3D sensor cameras situated at appropriate angles around the periphery.

“Good evening, all.” Squad Leader’s luscious, high yet masculine voice echoed out, then, a full-color hologram appeared above the darkened myPhone screen.

“Good evening, Squad Leader.” They all said in unison.

“I hope you don’t mind I conduct this conference in English. When you’re all separate I’d normally speak to you in your mother tongue or One World Speech, but tonight for the sake of convenience...” He left the remainder of the sentence unspoken, as was his habit.

“No problem, Squad Leader. On behalf of all the non-native English speakers here, please continue.” Jamuklé’s politeness seemed saccharine to Xiem... then again, everyone was being pretty polite.

“Well then. As you all know, I’ve been asking you to complete certain tasks ever since you were selected to join the Squad some time ago. And, in all these tasks you have been successful. Each of you has been rewarded in equal measure, without bias to difficulty of task, gender, etcetera---”

“Glad to know you’re an equal opportunity employer!” Risam blurted out, much to the dismay of the others involved.

“Risam-dijun, I would appreciate if you did not interrupt Squad Leader,” Wilson said in his lilting, airy voice, using the polite general honorific for those in low ranking combat roles.

“Fine, fine...” Risam quickly relented. Though he liked to joke around, he wanted to avoid the ire of everyone involved here so soon after meeting for the first time. A warm breeze fluttered through the room as the group waited for the man in the hologram to continue. Though it was mid-November, it still felt like late Summer instead of the middle of Autumn.

Wilson turned back to the myPhone and said, “Muijun, please continue.”

Squad Leader took in a little breath, then, as if the mere effort of talking would use up all the remaining life left in his body, he began to speak.

“My friends, do you remember what happened 33 years ago? For most of you it was probably around the time you were born.”

Yukiko piped up, “Yes, of course. It’s one of the first things we learned in school. In 2030, Organized Religion ended on the Earth, and the New Age began.”

Squad Leader smiled and nodded, “Correct. Do you know what this was, this ‘Religion?’”

The group stayed silent, nervous about giving an incorrect answer.

Squad Leader went on, “Well to be honest, there are many answers to this particular question. In the time of Organized Religion, each Human had their own view on this matter. As you can imagine, it created quite a terrible situation. There are still, presently, as many opinions about things as there are people. But when you bring in something as baseless, unprovable, as *unquantifiable* as religion, it creates a situation wherein people are very ready to give up logic in favor of things that apparently exist beyond their comprehension; that there is, for example, a will in the universe that supersedes theirs, and is, at best and worst, the source of their actions. There is no blame, there is no culpability in a world with religion, my friends. Hence the New Age Creed of 2035.”

Squad Leader paused here, seemingly not for dramatic effect so much as to allow the heavy topic sink into the group. During the time he had been working with them, he hadn’t brought it up before.

“Until this moment, the missions you’ve been conducting have essentially been to gather information, and in some cases, to eliminate the last vestiges of religion. As you know, I’ve only ever asked you to pull plugs or poison glasses. You all have yet to draw blood, my friends.”

Xiern gulped expectantly. It was true, they hadn’t.

“My friends, do you know what the Bible is? Or the Torah, or the Quran? How about the Bhagavad Gita?”

They all shook their heads, no. But then Hanu said, “Yes, actually, they sound familiar. Those are part of the Forbidden Documents, are they not?”

Squad Leader smirked. “Yes, you may know them as the Forbidden Documents, but the truth is that they are not Forbidden so much as totally

destroyed.” As Squad Leader said “totally” his voice lilted a bit for added emphasis.

“Any religious document is disgusting because it confuses the readers and incites them to believe less in the capabilities of their fellow Humans, and more in the actions and abilities of beings and creatures that do not exist. Shameful, wouldn’t you agree?”

It did make sense, so they nodded in unison, as if of one mind.

“Truly I tell you, there is nothing worse than someone who embodies such beliefs. They are scourge at worst, and at best they are unhelpful—”

“But isn’t there one religious document that is not Forbidden?” Lamli knew ze had heard of one before but couldn’t place it.

“Yes, you’re right Lamli, it’s called the Dao De Jing. The reason it is not Forbidden is because it makes no claims as to a rightful ruler or gods, and is therefore not actually classified as a religious text. In fact, it says something different—there is nothing except ‘The Way.’ I’ve always thought it was the prettiest of possible sentiments because it doesn’t seek to separate Humans from the construction of the universe.”

Hanu and Yukiko held each other’s hands, while Xiem glanced over at Risam, who sat there picking his nails, apparently immensely bored by the topic. But the truth was that these words were making everyone a little bit on edge. Squad Leader had never lectured like this. The gravity of the conversation, and the fact that this was the first time they had been asked to meet like this, were combining into an almost unbearable tension.

“Do you have any questions before I go on, junren?”<sup>3</sup> Squad Leader made a slow turn to look at everyone individually. It looked like each one of them except for Xiem shook their head no. He was about to ask his question when Risam beat him to it:

“Why are you giving us a history lesson, muijun? We’re all getting bitten up out here.”

“Quiet Risam-dijun, have more faith in your mosquito incense.” Xiem smiled inwardly at Yukiko’s sense of humor.

“What?! He *asked* if anyone had questions!” Risam immediately escalated to an indignant tone.

Squad Leader chuckled, “Oh, ever the impatient one aren’t you Risam? Ok I’ll get right to it. I want you to all understand the extreme importance of the work you do. Although you commit to ending the lives of or sabotaging

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<sup>3</sup>Junren = soldier(s)



those who would throw this world back into Extreme Chaos, I know it must be hard for you to know the extent of the Good that you do for all Humanity.”

Xiem followed Squad Leader’s train of thought. “I know what you mean, Squad Leader. You’ve never told us the identities of the people or the contents of the data we’ve destroyed...only the time, place, and method.”

“Ah, Xiem, you were always the quickest on your feet.” The group cast dissatisfied glances over at Xiem, except for Risam, who didn’t care one way or another. Because none of the teams had met in person before, none of them knew each other’s individual relationships with Squad Leader. Why was he bringing such ill-placed, professionalism-destroying comments out into the open like this?

Squad Leader looked down at someplace beneath him as if he were looking at notes. Some hair of indiscernible blended color fell across his face and when he looked up he serenely brushed it away, as a public speaker who has been working the crowd gets to the crux of their speech not just with their words, but with body language in equal measure.

“It was time for you all to meet because the task which I now have for you requires the best out of all the Squads.”

Well that was interesting – it hadn’t been apparent before that there were other Squads.

“Wait—do you mean, we’re all from different Squads?” Lamli didn’t quite get what he meant. Risam did though.

“No Lamli, he means each pair here is a Squad itself; as opposed to subdivisions of what we had originally thought was the Squad. I’m guessing others have failed in their tasks, which is why they aren’t here right now.” Risam finished up his hypothesis in a self-satisfied tone.

“Bingo. It is true. If you aren’t here, it means, regrettably, that the Squad has failed the task in some way. None of you here have known such failures.” Then, as if mentioning it as an afterthought said, “Sorry for obfuscating the makeup of the Squad system. I had to for essential security and secrecy purposes.”

Xiem’s palms began to sweat a little bit. He felt like everyone else here was jumping out of their skin, but he didn’t see it on anyone’s faces.

“Now Squads, are you ready to receive your task?” Squad Leader always said something like this before handing out the task.

“Yes, muijun. The Will of the People is the Will of our Bodies.” Each one said this in their own tone of voice, such that even though they were all

saying it at the same time, it sounded like they were each saying something completely different.

“Understood. The task is as follows.” Everyone sat up straight, at attention.

“The Legacy Division of the One World Government has received intelligence that a previously unidentified entity is preparing to disseminate paper copies of a variety of different Forbidden Religious Texts by way of a solar-powered stealth plane. As you may or may not know, this type of aircraft is very hard to detect because it produces no fuel trace and, if unmanned, makes almost no noise. While we could make an estimate of its flight path and track it down with a drone, it wouldn’t necessarily help. By the time we’d found one of them, any amount of other possible deployments could be well on their way to dropping Forbidden Texts, something we simply cannot tolerate under any circumstances...”

“I’ve always wondered, Squad Leader, why couldn’t we just tell them not to believe in these myths or elements of religion? Surely the world we’ve built is testament to Humanity’s deficit in a world with gods?...” Risam was asking genuinely, but everyone else looked at him angrily. Even Lamli, whose neutral features were generally soft and unimposing now looked incredibly rigid, livid. What a stupid question!

“Risam, my friend, if it were that easy I wouldn’t bother sending you on such missions. Wouldn’t you agree?” Risam said nothing, though he supposed he knew it to be true.

“Do not underestimate the Power of Religion. Once instilled within an individual, it is almost impossible to get rid of. In the years before the New Age, many people died because they couldn’t reconcile what would eventually comprise the tenets of the secular One World, with their ‘Religion,’ now so strange in the face of modernity. Yet, there were always some who found new ways to integrate their beliefs into their reality. The violent culmination of these methods is something called ‘Holy War’.”

The group stared at each other in stunned silence. A breeze that seemed somehow colder wafted through the broken room. Xiem shivered even though he knew somewhere in the back of his mind that the air was not actually colder. Squad Leader’s words chilled them all to the bone - because they realized what he was talking about: The Rift.

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I thought the taste would get better the more Drop I drank, and I didn't believe him when he told me the taste would only get worse. I shrugged my shoulders when he said this, partly because I did not believe him, and partly because I was trying to impress him. But this was years ago. Those times are long gone now, and in their place remains what I would describe as a true cold efficiency – a somewhat fucked up dopaminergic system. But in the end, it's okay, because things in this world continue to remain interesting enough that I want to see what happens to it. I do not, presently, have a desire to kill myself, although should the time come when I no longer have the belief that I will remain entertained, I will likely engage in a suicide mission. In the meantime, I have my bottles, whether it be Drop or Gin.

The Sweet will and must, fortunately, and hopefully, forever remain distant from me because I'm almost 100% sure I wouldn't be able to control myself if faced with a baggy. I wasn't able to control myself the last time, you see. You get all tingly and you just want to rub everything erogenous endlessly, and the thoughts that seem so wrong become effortlessly correct. And again, it doesn't matter. I don't have it now because things remain interesting. I also get to end the lives of people who would threaten the Peace. I almost can't wait to spill blood for the first time—the exhilaration will hopefully take the place of everything else, and I will finally be able to commit to something forever deeply. You see, I imagine this is the attraction of Religion: *submitting* to something that you make greater than yourself – it takes the uncertainty out of everything and replaces doubt with a concrete mission.

All I want is the mission that I can feed my entire Life Force into.

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The Truth is that Love is an almost impossible, unsupportable state of being. It entraps and binds in incredibly uncomfortable contours and contexts that, if not for Love, would normally threaten the existence of the individuals involved. Because, of course, Love is the Craft of intertwining one's decisions with those of another. It is the release and surrender of our own in favor of that which is not our own. Love and Faith...these are the Calamities of Humanity because not only are they so often confused for other, dissimilar, less powerful things, they are at once totally hidden and obscure to us, and yet somehow at the same time are unbearably well known.

There were some of us that saw True Faith and ran to destroy it, not immediately, but eventually, years ago. And at that same moment there were those who saw our expressions of Love as Unfaithful and ran to destroy them, again, not so quickly as to cause the intense alarm that would eventually ensue, but enough that I saw the decline towards war almost immediately as it began. Because, we weren't looking at different faiths or belief systems at odds, but, incontrovertibly, different expressions of Love attempting to win out over the other.

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Squad Leader flashed a diagram onto the wall behind him, and instructed the holographic system to display the entirety of the wall.

"We know that one of the printing bases for the illegal psyops is located here..." A tiny island in what used to be called the Pacific Ocean began to slowly pulsate.

"While it would be unfortunate if there were other printing bases, we have confidence that they do not have the resources to commit to more than one press. Also, any attempt to disseminate the Texts through the internet or myPhone decentralized linking is not as efficient or worthwhile because we could, as you know, isolate and thwart it almost immediately. Hence, the tendency towards a print-based propaganda machine. Understand?"

The group nodded, anxious for Squad Leader to get to the point. Xiem noticed Günter tapping his cross-legged foot against his right hand, which he thought was interesting because the build of his figure wouldn't seem to betray nervousness. Then again, Xiem knew better than to totally utilize outer form for judgement.

Squad Leader appeared to be gathering materials together on the invisible desk beneath him. Without looking up he said, somewhat distractedly,

"My friends, I want you to fully comprehend what it is I'm asking of you. I'm not asking you to sabotage a production facility. I'm asking you to go and spill the blood of those who would seek to destroy the Peace this world has so painstakingly achieved through conflict. It is your duty, should you choose to accept this mission, undeniably, to let the blood flow freely till every last drop of these saboteurs soaks the shoreline of the tiny island they sought to hide on."

The chilly breeze that had shivered through the group grew even colder. The rustling of the trees and the murmur of the forest life around them becoming painfully grating upon the ears of those assembled, as, during

moments of great stress and concentration during an exam, the scratch of the chalk against the board or the tick of the clock on the wall are rendered somehow unbearably loud.

“If you accept the mission as I have outlined it, please indicate your assent on the Song app.”

Hanu and Yukiko pulled out their myPhones and accepted the mission immediately. Günter and Lamli followed their lead. Risam shot a glance over at Xiem as if he were the one that was supposed to decide for their Squad. But the decision process had never been a team effort, and it certainly wasn't going to be like that now - at this moment, each person was making the decision to accept the mission on their own volition, no one else would be able to influence the moment. Once someone accepted a mission in the Song app, it must be completed to the best of the individual's ability, or else they would undergo Termination. This didn't mean they would be killed, not exactly. Their financial assets would be frozen and removed from the individual's custody, and he, she or ze would be unable to access any utilities or infrastructure anywhere in the One World. One would be doomed to wander, living only on the kindness of those who still have access to One World finances and other necessities.

Xiem just looked at Risam and said nothing, not because nothing could be said, but because there was nothing to say. Risam looked down at his myPhone and opened up the Song app, accessed Squad Leader's profile and, with a hand that Xiem had never really seen shake before, accepted the mission. It was as usual, Xiem supposed, better to accept than face the consequences of being told the information and not accepting. As such, Xiem accepted in turn. During these moments, Squad Leader remained silent, as was his custom. As each acceptance filtered into the terminal on his end, he would blink and smile as if surprised that they were during so.

Xiem looked at the others, and, as they were all waiting on Squad Leader's words, he found that everyone else was glancing around for some emotion, some facial expression...some sign of approval or disapproval at what was happening. But each one, finding that no one was making such an expression, turned their eyes downward towards Squad Leader's hologram. Günter seemed like he wanted to say something - Xiem heard him take in a breath as if he were going to launch into something requiring a great deal of air to say. But no sounds came from his mouth, because instead of the speech that Xiem was expecting, there was only a prolonged sigh.

Squad Leader cleared his throat, “Wonderful! All of you have accepted unfalteringly – unhesitatingly! Truly I tell you, there are no better advocates for Freedom in this world than those who will fight for it without question.”

Lamli squirmed when he said this, and z’s squirming did not go unnoticed by anyone, including Squad Leader. The reason it could not go unnoticed was because, as ze squirmed, the floorboards unmistakably creaked and groaned as ze shifted z’s position.

“Is there anything you want to say, Lamli-dijun? I think if you have any concerns they might as well be voiced now wouldn’t you say?”

Everyone looked at Lamli expectantly. A moment of horror passed across z’s face, but ze quickly recovered and gave the critically wry smile characteristic of the neutral gender.

“No Squad Leader, there is nothing that I would presently say.” Xiem watched as Lamli’s lovely neutral voice registered in people’s minds as if it were their own thoughts as well. Of course there was nothing to say!

“Very well then. The mission controls and supply points will be provided to you through the Song app. Let it always be remembered that the Will of the People is the Will of our Bodies. That is all. Signing off.”

“The Will of the People is the Will of our Bodies!” They all echoed as Squad Leader disengaged his terminal, leaving the broken room suddenly pitch black save for the screens of those who had set extended timers for the backlights of their myPhones, their faces pale shadows of what they looked like in the light. Günter spoke first,

“Lamli, you must be more careful of your body language.”

Lamli flashed him an enraged look.

“I think I’m hardly the type of person you’d need to say that to, Günter.” Xiem giggled softly but said nothing. It was a “bad habit” of his: outwardly laughing at some awkward interaction people were having. But it was true though - the neutral gender was probably the most aware of body language out of any Human gender. Günter just grunted and didn’t reply.

“Now, please can we not bicker so soon after we have gathered...” Hanu was anxious to get people on good terms. “Is this not a moment for celebration of some sort?”

“Yeah you’re right Hanu – where’s the booze?!” Risam was eager to have people start getting along as soon as possible too.

“I’m not your friend, Hanu.” Günter was not making friends with anyone quickly.

Hanu ignored Günter: “I have some booze, actually. Delicious Trappist beer, I’d been saving for such an occasion!” Everyone gasped in shock as Hanu pulled two unbelievably rare bottles from his knapsack.

The Trappist order of monks had been outlawed many years ago, and while the beer itself wasn’t illegal, authentic Trappist beer was more scarce than any precious metal.

Xiem was a little abashed because he said, “Hanu, are you sure? We haven’t even been successful yet...and we are celebrating?”

Hanu just chuckled deeply and replied, “Why not celebrate when we know not of our success, but instead, the potential of it?”

Somehow this seemed illogical to the rest of the assembled, but no one had anything to say in retort. And in addition, Xiem, who might have been the one closest to voicing some objection, wasn’t one to pass up valuable alcohol. Neither for that matter was Risam – he was already back from searching the kitchen downstairs for vessels to share the liquid.

.....

I’ve always hated Günter. Or at least, I’ve always hated how he’s treated me. It’s not like I’m not a Human being - far from it. I’m just a recent development, that’s all. And it’s unfortunate that I got placed with someone as backwards and Old World as Günter. Incredibly ironic, actually. The common courtesy that would normally displace such animosity is entirely absent from our relationship. Günter is into guys but for some reason he’s not attracted at all to my male form. Well, it’s worse than not being attracted to it...it’s like he doesn’t “believe” in it. I know this to be true.

I’ll never forget the disgusted look that flashed across his face as I snuck up on him while he had been napping, straddling his hips, the idea flashed through my mind that I’d like to have him as a male, and he, waking slowly, with delightfully unfocused eyes, now staring back at me, wide eyed, mouth agape.

“Get off of me, Lamli. Now.” The low growl of a threatened beast.

I don’t really know what came over me then, but somehow I took his words as a sign of encouragement because I rolled forward a bit to increase the pressure between our hips, a gesture I thought he might enjoy I suppose, but it instead resulted in an immediate, and what I still find to have been a rather uncalled for backhanded slap across the face. I can’t believe how quickly I crumpled to the floor then. All the training I had been through, all the

preparation to hone my body into balance, did not do enough to ready me for the violent termination of my lust.

I was a man at that moment, right? Or at the very least, a Human. Why wasn't I treated as such?

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At this point we find the gathered making preparations for sleep.

Among them one could see the budding blossom of that which we call Trust, the ephemerally fragile kind that only common experience can bring about. None of them had ever met before, but each was acting as if they had always known each other. Somehow they all knew that their lives had overlapped in one form or another. Or at the very least, they may have felt a bond in a "shared mission." Consequently, none of them had any qualms divvying up, with barely any room to spare, the confined space of the downstairs of the house, which thankfully did not have a hole in the side of it.

Risam sat engaging his journal app on the day's events. A few hours earlier he and Xiem had been to a Geri-community on a routine plugpull. Rosewood walls and afternoon sunshine painting the scene in the Rogue's state-subsidized apartment. These moments were always the most silent, as the death alarm would be disabled to give them enough time to extract themselves while they waited for the stopping of the breath to set in.

And it was indeed in those times of silence that Risam would wonder how he had developed his desire for Deathmaking. When had it been instilled such that these moments of waiting created within him such a rush at the sound of that final sigh, that final whisper? There were some that spoke shuddering, stuttering final sentences or murmurs. They were the most thrilling. Sometimes the stress of a plugpull would reel the body awake. How this happened Risam did not exactly know.

He did know, however, the alarm controls on most standard makes and models of life-support systems, as he had been instructed in their use as soon as he had enlisted as a junren. And yes, he would shut off those alarms without disabling the machine, which was absolutely necessary because if the machine were turned off for some reason, another alert would be sent to a central command system within the Geri-community. Disabling this internal alarm was a task that, while if given enough time Risam could have also completed, did not match up with the constraints as prescribed by the mission. One always had



to follow these constraints, otherwise failure was unavoidable. Whoever was on the other side of the Song app had already done extensive research on the movements of people going in and out of the apartment down to the very last millisecond.

In any case, there was the most recent rose-hued Geri-community of the morning that had instilled within Risam a feeling he had never experienced before, because, as the standard elements of the mission were worked through in sequence, the alarm disabled, the blinds shifted to let light in but not allow viewing from the outside, the door shut, Xiem there listening for any unexpected foot-traffic, the A/C turned up high to prevent the body from decomposing too quickly, and then there was Risam's left hand at the plug for the Independent Life Yolk Support Machine, the right reaching for his pants in anticipation. But then something was different this time, the plug hand reached faster than Risam expected, or maybe it was the other hand had moved faster and had somehow egged on the rest of his body to move out of sync, either way, this time the plug was out before Risam even noticed he had pulled it, and there was so anguished a cry that drew even Risam's cry-deaf Self in attention towards it. Their eyes did meet in such a way that threatened to overthrow Risam's sensibilities. These eyes were of someone who not only was not ready to die just yet, but would also definitely not simply stop breathing with the ILYSM unplugged.

"Look at you!" The man's voice brought Risam out of his surprise. Xiem had moved from the door as soon as he had realized something was different about the current engagement.

"Pass me that water on the table there."

Risam complied with the man's request asking, "Look...at me?" In his somewhat nasal northeastern English voice, he chanced a question for clarification.

"Yes, both of ya! The Major Energy of a Child in an Adult's body if I ever did see it."

Xiem was preparing the failsafe injection.

"Adults and Children have different energies?" Risam risked another question.

"Well, not exactly. You can try to imagine it like this: envision inside your chest cavity a bowl with two fish inside it. When you are born, one of these fish is substantially larger than the other. It has been directly fed with the life force of your Mother who has carried you dutifully for nearly a whole year. And as you might believe, what a large fish it is! All colorful and full of life. The

other fish is not malnourished so much as having had to live off the dregs of its more favored partner.” Risam swallowed nervously, nodding at the man while shooting a glance back over at Xiem who was flicking the tip of the syringe.

“Then, over time, the fish living off the scraps rises up and becomes more selfish and cutthroat, bright orange and gold, and it will do anything it can to get the food itself. It lets its colorful partner stay alive now, in a similar position to the one it had found itself in around the time you were born. So I can see, in you, that your multicolored fish is still large, while the orangey fish has yet to outgrow it completely. Think of it in this way for the time you remain on this planet: our conscious existence is always as such, the Child and Adult energies vying within us until we are no more. There is no other composition, no other equation as fundamental in understanding our Selves, as this dichotomy I have described.”

Risam thought for a moment that the reason this man had such stunningly bright eyes was because there was pretty much nothing left to see of him, the rest of his body covered by a white sheet. He was desperate to concentrate on something else besides these fucked up words the Rogue was saying.

“Neh, Xiem. Why do you think his eyes look so bright to me?” Risam realized as he uttered these words that he had never asked such a question in his entire life.

Xiem just laughed in that fucking annoying know-it-all chuckle and said, “Risam, our eyes are the most vulnerable, open part of our bodies. They all seem exceptionally bright and shiny if you look close enough. Take mine, for example.”

Risam turned away from the man in the bed towards Xiem who had by this time inserted the failsafe into the man’s intravenous port. But Risam wasn’t looking at the IV’s injection site, he was looking directly, wordlessly, and honestly into Xiem’s eyes. Risam had, before this moment, never really tried to pay attention to someone’s eyes as a point of fascination. Xiem had deep blue eyes that sparkled at this angle to the light-bearing window and somehow seemed richly shaded by the hue of the room.

“Hahhah.” The man in the bed’s laugh started strong but ended in a pitiful wheeze.

“You two are kinda similar aint’cha? That’s nice. It has always been, and will remain tremendously difficult to find a True Friend. I myself, in the whole of my life that I can see is about to come to a close, have only ever found one True Friend. Sometimes I wonder if the reason why I don’t feel too bad

about the whole ‘dying’ thing, is that my Friend is waiting for me on the other side. It just doesn’t seem like I’ll be alone there, somehow. Kind of funny right? You have friends so that this world ain’t so bad, but then some day you realize they could help make the next one not so bad either.”

Xiem and Risam touched foreheads as he said this, the One World gesture of friendship. People never got this close unless they truly trusted each other. It was too vulnerable a position otherwise.

“Do you want to do it, Ris?” Risam shook his head.

“No, Xi. I think we do this one together.” Risam reached out his hand and clasped the syringe such that his thumb locked over Xiem’s, already lightly pressed against the plunger.

This afternoon was assuredly brimming with unexpected events because then Risam did another thing he had never done before.

“Are you ready, Rogue?”

The man in the bed lay back and “mm-hmed” his assent, saying, “Yessir at this point I am. Although I would like it to go on record that I have only ever *allegedly* been a Rogue.” And with that, Risam pressed against Xiem, inciting the plunger to push through the chamber of the syringe, the failsafe irretrievably entering the man. They stood there motionless until the man did breathe his last.

“Omengi jerenze omenso tayarjarana ja shadarnadar.”<sup>4</sup> Xiem recited in One World speech a very shortened version of the Final Rite for the man in the bed.

After a few more moments of silence, which they could afford because although the man had woken up and spoken at length they were still on schedule, Risam asked, ever so quietly,

“Neh, Xi. What are these Rogues anyway?”

“I don’t know, Ris.” Xiem was replying in equally hushed tones. “What I do know is, this conversation may have jarred us a bit, but we best keep in mind that there are safe and dangerous questions. I think the one you asked is a dangerous one and there may be a safer way to ask it.”

They had never spoken to a Rogue at length like this before. What did he mean by “the next world?” The words were unfamiliar to them.

The glass of water the man had taken a drink from contained what looked like lemon or lime pulp slowly floating to the bottom of the glass, as

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<sup>4</sup> “We attest this person has not transgressed us.” The last line of the Final Rite of Humanity.

snowflakes do when falling towards the earth, silently melding into piles of white or vanishing into moist ground.

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The timed glowlights that had been set up in order to allow everyone to prepare for bed were about to automatically extinguish themselves to conserve energy in case light was needed later on in the night. Not that they relied on anything as unreliable as replaceable batteries – glowlights had been capable of utilizing efficient solar charged batteries at least for the past two decades.

Risam, having finished his journal entry, glanced over at the rest of the assembled in the dim. Straight across from him were Hanu and Yukiko who had brought with them a sleeping bag and underpad large enough to fit two people. They were blissfully sound asleep in each other's arms. As he saw their embrace Risam remarked to himself, "It sure is nice to fall asleep with someone so near..." his eyes then closing similarly to how the man in the bed's had.

Xiem, in his own sleeping bag next to Risam, was spying on Jamuklé and Wilson who were huddling together over a myPhone in a corner of the room. Xiem had noted that this pair had said the least out of anyone, and what they had said was largely insulting or condescending—didn't they know anything about first impressions?...All the same, because he didn't feel tired, and because he wanted to start becoming as aware as possible of everyone's motives, he was debating whether or not to walk over and engage them in conversation. Xiem prided himself on being able to ascertain different aspects of people's behavior just through talking to them.

He thought about who else gathered here could potentially do the same, and he decided it was probably Lamli. Similarly to Xiem, ze likely had to develop techniques for identifying the emotions behind people's words sort of as a self-defense mechanism. But there was also a sense that because Lamli was neutral gender, ze had the opportunity to experience life from both sides of the Human Gender Spectrum. He would have to make a point to talk to ze about it in a polite way, time-permitting.

For now though, he mustered up the strength to walk over to Jamuklé and Wilson and sit down cross legged on the floor as a gesture of politeness – it seemed rude for some reason to just go over and sit on someone's bed, no matter how makeshift it seemed. The pair looked at him wordlessly, a little like what one would imagine a deer in headlights looks like, then returned to the screen set in between them.

“I feel like maybe we got off to a bad start before somehow, and I’d like to rectify that.” Xiem started out with carefully chosen words.

“What would make you think that, Xiem-dijun?” Jamuklé asked in a level voice without looking up from the myPhone.

“Well, we didn’t really exchange proper greetings ya know? Also there’s no need to be so formal in this context, you can just call me Xiem.”

Wilson clicked off his myPhone screen with a button on the right side of the device in apparent annoyance. He was about to say something but Jamuklé spoke for him, “Well, we feel it is necessary Xiem-*dijun*,” he extended the honorific to emphasize that he was using it with an emotion quite the opposite of the respect it was supposed to convey.

Even though Xiem felt annoyed at the way this conversation was proceeding, he didn’t let himself get discouraged. He instead decided to try to engage with Wilson in conversation because of the pair he seemed to be more civil, or at least he tried to be more polite.

“Why do you feel your partner has such animosity towards me, Wilson-dijun?” Xiem was unafraid of talking about Jamuklé as if he wasn’t sitting there. Jamuklé had for the moment lost the right to being considered as a participant of this conversation.

“Well I dunno...” Wilson started off in a way that sounded like he *did* know why.

“I think it may have something to do with muijun’s treatment of you during the task giving. It seemed...preferential, somehow.”

Xiem remained motionless so as to avoid the commitment of showing some emotional reaction to the statement. It was true that Squad Leader had used words that would indicate some sort of favoritism, but Xiem wanted to convey to people that there was really no such thing. In other words, it was equally as frustrating for him to have been singled out by Squad Leader as anyone else here.

“I’m sorry about that. But I don’t have control over any of his comments. And also it would have been nicer for you to ask me about it instead of just assuming that we had a more special relationship than the rest of you. The truth could not be any further from what you think. I remain just as emotionally tied to Squad Leader as any of you, which is to say there is barely any connection at all!” Xiem said this last part as if it was supposed to be a joke, but it backfired because what he did not know, and indeed could not have known, was that Jamuklé had made it a personal mission of his to be the most favored out of all the Squad Members – the most rewarded. Whatever form that

reward came in, be it compliments or extra money or living space didn't matter – Jamuklé's narrow, yet extremely sincere, personal mission was at this very moment inadvertently insulted by Xiem who had no strong care for professionalism, even though it was obviously important to some extent.

What Xiem also could never have known was that Jamuklé had for his entire life felt like he wasn't in the "right body." So not only were there moments where he felt at odds with people he had to interact with, but when facing inwardly and assessing himself, he found that the self that was perceived externally as a "he" was something more like what Jamuklé imagined internally might be called a "she." There had been Pre-Rift methods of transforming one's gender but, they were hopelessly low tech compared to the methods now available today. This didn't mean that they had become inexpensive – the opposite was true actually. And in the end, one could even say that one of Jamuklé's main motives for becoming a Squad Member was to save up enough credits so she could undergo the gender reassignment. And to do that in a timely manner she would have to excel among the Squads, undoubtedly.

The Squads had never been a centralized fighting force like armies of the past. The Squads were *decentralized*, each member having equal rank to others, the only discerning factor is that those who remained part of Squads were the ones who never failed. Put more simply, it had never occurred to any of those assembled before why there was zero tolerance for failure – but now it made sense. How better to prune and assemble an elite task force? The only thing was, now that they were centralized, problems of the gathering were already beginning to manifest themselves.

So for Jamuklé, in the moment that Xiem made such an ill-timed joke, while she was simply trying to do some quiet reading to get her mind off the fact that no one, especially that horrible neutral gender in the other corner, could possibly understand her and the struggle she faced, she felt compelled to reach into her pocket and pull out a miniaturized sonic knife which was standard issue among the Squads.

"You know, I was going to wait to do this until later on, but I've decided I might as well try to deal with you now." Jamuklé had his hands inside his sleeping bag, motionless.

"What do you mean?" Xiem was cautious, but not alarmed.

"I mean, I've reviewed the mission controls, and there's nothing in there that says we cannot kill each other, as long as it doesn't immediately jeopardize the mission."

As Xiem debated in his head about the vagueness of this stipulation, Jamuklé suddenly thrust her arm upwards, the sonic knife ripping through the top of the sleeping bag directly towards Xiem's neck. What Jamuklé hadn't expected was that while the knife would very easily be able to cut through the bag, her own arm strength would not permit the fabric to rip enough for her arm to achieve the length required to pierce through Xiem's throat, and instead it superficially sliced the surface of his skin near to where the neck connects to the upper body. Seeing that she had failed in her sneak attack, Jamuklé pressed the button on the bottom of the knife that would stop the progressive blade motion and gazed dreamily at the blood slipping slowly down the handle, now along the arm, now beginning to wet the fabric around the opening the knife had cut.

Jamuklé stared at Xiem's Adam's Apple snarling, "Fuck you Xiem. Just fuck yourself and die. You ever want to rip that part of your throat out cuz it didn't seem right? Ever want to slice your dick away cuz it feels like an unwelcome addition to your body? An afterthought? You behave like you ain't never suffered, daho.<sup>5</sup> I can see it in your body language. What are you even aspiring to do here? You're behaving like nothing of this matters to anyone here."

"I don't understand--"

"You act like shit so I'm treating you like shit, get it?"

"Can I *please* finish what I was saying? And can you please take that away from my throat?" Xiem ignored his initial instinct to lash out at having been called such an insulting word, and chose to keep his hands up as if someone was pointing a gun at him, assumedly in a gesture of submission. Jamuklé snorted softly and backed off a bit, but kept menacing the knife.

"I think we can come to a consensus about why people are here, with chilled-out dialogue honestly. I'm sorry if I came across as uncaring, but that may be because of my own insecurities. I would have thought it obvious that no one is here for no reason..." Xiem trailed off to let his explanation sit in Jamuklé's mind.

During this interchange, Wilson had shifted himself back to be closer to the wall away from the blade, because he was afraid of Jamuklé cutting him by accident. He had by now pulled himself together after the shock of his partner's outburst and murmured to her for calming purposes:

"Jamuklé, don't think for a moment that the implications of your having been the first to spill blood here won't be taken seriously. And it's not even the blood of a Rogue..."

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<sup>5</sup> daho: a One World Speech equivalent for Pre-Rift English, "fucking piece of shit."

Jamuklé sucked her teeth and retracted the knife as Xiem stretched his arm out for a handshake. He wasn't at all deterred by nearly having his throat nearly stabbed – he was exhilarated!

“Temporary truce Jamuklé?” Xiem asked in his warmest sounding voice.

Jamuklé waited a moment then grasped Xiem's hand heartily.

“Anyone who's willing to shake my hand after I've almost killed them is either incredibly foolish or...” Jamuklé didn't finish her sentence and instead said, “Okay, Xiem. A truce until you insult me again.”

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Berzek-slujun sat with a coffee cup in front of him, filled with a dark undeterminable liquid from which a light steam slowly wafted upwards, disappearing as it reached the rim of the cup. His face did not appear to be of someone who had just received a promotion to the penultimate 6<sup>th</sup> Rank of the One World Forces. No. Berzek wore the face of someone who has been beset with some abominable travail that has in some way been brought about by their own doing.

He glanced up from his cup and looked around at the room he had sought solace in. He sat at a table about the size of a twin bed. The table was not ornate in any way, except that it had been treated with some sort of chemical that made it unnaturally shiny. He supposed it was meant to look like how a piece of amber does when held to the light, perhaps. A myPhone lay near the edge, as if it had just escaped falling off the side from having been tossed across the table. Berzek had just thrown a hateful glance over at it when a high-quality female computerized voice from the myPhone pulled him from his thoughts.

“Slujun, you have an incoming transmission from Hermis-muijun. Will you accept it?”

Berzek didn't answer the prompt immediately. Instead, he chose to gaze longingly out the wall-length glass windows that let the viewer look out onto a delightfully curated garden, cultivated with trees, shrubs and somber colored flowerbeds generally following the path of a small man-made creek which started just below the edge of the floor and stretched into the distance towards the other administrative buildings on the Forces Flagstand One Basecamp.

“Slujun, you have 31.66 seconds until I disconnect the call. What should I do?”



Berzek internally recited a short list of expletives that would have a high chance of causing the ears of someone less substantial to bleed profusely. Only about 30 seconds of peace left. He waited out those precious last seconds, then instructed his myPhone to route the call, but not to engage any visual features just yet. That way he wouldn't have to look at Hermis' shit grin longer than he had to.

"Berzek, my friend! It's been ages!" Squad Leader's voice rung out through the myPhone's speakers. Berzek was annoyed at the lack of formality.

"Muijun, to what do I owe this rare direct line of communication?"

"Oh ho. You want to skip the foreplay, huh? You wanna get right down in my pants, doncha?"

Berzek decided to play the honest card with Hermis.

"No, actually. The thought revolts me to no end."

A mock sigh of sadness murmured through the speaker.

"Ah, well. Some other time then. Say, how about we turn on the video, hmm? I wanna see that gorgeous face of yours."

Berzek didn't want to comply, but the problem was that Hermis, even if he did not act like it, was higher rank than Berzek. So, he begrudgingly reached out to his myPhone and tapped the icon that would engage the hologram construction protocols. The figure of Hermis appeared over the phone. Only his upper body was visible. He stood there, shirtless, pale, well-honed muscle, hair damp as if he had just gotten out of the shower, and proceeded to stare down Berzek.

"Muijin, I must say this is starting to seem borderline inappropriate."

"What, never seen a man shirtless before?"

Berzek wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up.

"Muijun, you'll likely be pleased to hear I have seen many men shirtless. But it just seems unprofessional to use a Forces Secured line to bare your chest to me."

"Aiya, Berzek. You always were so prude."

Without putting his shirt on, Hermis sat down in a chair, as if this would make the situation less uncomfortable. It did, somewhat, although Berzek hated how Hermis mixed professionalism with...well, total bullshit quite frankly.

Hermis continued, "I have amalgamated my Squads, Berzek. The ball is rolling."

Berzek rolled his eyes at Hermis' old-fashioned way of talking. Why did he talk like that? They were about the same age, after all.

“You have the final profiles in order? You know I need the info for record-keeping purposes, muijun.”

“Yes, yes of course I have them. I’ve already sent you them over Context.”

Context was an internal secure messaging app usable by the upper-echelon of the Forces.

“Bekarna.<sup>6</sup> Is there anything else you would like me to do to further the situation, muijun?”

Hermis looked like he was calculating an incredibly heavy decision.

“Yes. I think it’d further situation if you would take off—”

“I forgot to mention, disrobing of any sort is out of the question, muijun. I am in an uncomfortably public place.”

“Ah! Oh well. At least you’re not opposed to it on principle.” Actually, Berzek *was* opposed to it in every way, shape, and form. But it would be against custom to speak so directly about it to someone of higher rank.

“Slujun, you are to review the profiles of the Squads involved and make sure there are no inconsistencies in how we assessed their Will and Faith levels.” In other words, he would have to make sure their ideology was not compromised in any way so as to jeopardize Hermis’ plans for them. But what these plans were, Berzek could only begin to guess. Hermis had not disclosed that info.

“What have the general tendencies been so far?”

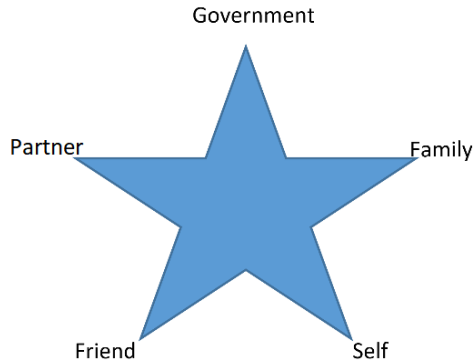
“Aiya, I don’t want to repeat what is already crystal clear on a piece of paper. I’ll see you later...I have some needs to take care of.” Hermis disconnected without another word.

Berzek just grunted and minimized the transmission program, opening up Context, navigating through the purple and white color scheme of the threaded chats, bringing up what Squad Leader had sent him.

The Five Great Tendencies chart was essentially a 5-pointed star with description text near the edges: Government, Partner, Family, Friend, and Self.

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<sup>6</sup> Bekarna = No uncertainty = “I understand”



If an individual were evaluated to be too preferential to any of the lower points below government, they would be brought in for a Termination trial. The One World citizen could be reinvigorated to move the evaluation point closer towards the center, but, if this were for some reason not possible, they would most likely be terminated.

It used to be that all One World citizens were rigorously evaluated on these points, for security reasons. But in recent years, the system had been relaxed for non-junren citizens. It was still absolutely essential, Berzek mused, that the evaluation be applied to people with the authority to commit to Deathmaking.

Berzek glanced up and out the window at the garden outside, and as he did so he instinctively reached up to brush a lock out of his face that was not there. He had had, at one point, long lush brown hair, but it was now cut short to the scalp, customary of male One World mourners.

He looked back down to Context and tapped a function button that would overlay each Squad Member's evaluation result on top of the base chart. He chose Xiem's first. A red dot appeared on the star well situated between Government, Partner, and Friend. This was an optimal reading because it was one of the furthest away from "self" an individual could be.

Berzek proceeded to overlay the rest of the Squad members into the evaluation chart, with arrows drawn towards the dots in the star to indicate who they belonged to. Each one of the members, aside from Xiem and Risam, who were both basically dead center, were situated on the right side of the chart. Clearly the majority of those assembled were more devoted to concerns nearer to Self or Family. This was not a point of contention so much as something to be cautiously aware of. These types of individuals were statistically

more likely to deviate untenably towards the Self tendency, and this deviation would inevitably result in a shift towards Rogue status.

Fascinating! Berzek was deeply intrigued by Hermis' choices. These profiles were not public information and there would be no way for the Squad members to know each other's tendencies.

"Berzek-slujun. Your transport to Central is ready. Shall I tell it to wait?"

Berzek did not reply. Instead, he switched off his myPhone and sat, eyes closed towards the light streaming through the window and tried to think through what Hermis might be up to.

.....

Dawn came to those assembled, and it did stream through every opening on the first floor of the house, spreading across the eyes of all yet sleeping. Silence, save for the soft snoring of some. Dust motes floated and careened across the room in the light of the sunbeams, increasing the dreamlike quality of the quiet.

A soft chirping sound began to emanate from somewhere in the room. At first it blended well with the scene unfolding here, but then it started to grow increasingly louder until the unobtrusive birdsong was now an unavoidable scream.

Lamli woke as the scream broadened and was no longer set apart by short pauses. This was z's alarm, and ze had become accustomed to listening for it in z's sleep. Without getting up, ze reached down for z's myPhone, situated to the left of z's sleeping bag.

"Reika, what time is it?" Reika was the name Lamli gave to z's myPhone user assistant.

"Good morning Lamli-muiha.<sup>7</sup> As of 26 seconds ago, the time was 09:00."

Lamli groaned...already 09:00?? Ze turned over onto z's side. To the right, Yukiko and Hanu were sleeping peacefully in each other's embrace. Lamli quickly turned over to look the other way – the sight made ze slightly ill to look at. To z's left was the oaf, Günter. No matter what ze thought of him while he was awake, he was still very attractive as he slept. Then again, most people's features became subdued in sleep...even the face of a beast.

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<sup>7</sup> Muiha = "master", from "mui" great and "ha" presently/affirmative copula. The sense of this word is temporary, as in "you are only my master at present."

Against z's better judgment, Lamli reached out to lightly touch his face. No change. Encouraged, ze began to delicately run z's hand across his cheek, down to his chin, now stroking the light stubble that had appeared over the course of the previous day. It felt nice to do this, and Günter didn't seem to mind, so ze ran z's hand lower, down the firm, taught chest, now lower, now Günter's hand is around Lamli's wrist and he's holding. Hard.

"Jenidu ja ogi yiki iujurunfenka neh?"<sup>8</sup> Günter was speaking through clenched teeth, using the angered mood.

"You never said "never," Günter. And why aren't you talking in English, you Pre-Rift bastard?" Lamli was playing it cool, using strong words with an even, level-headed voice.

"It's because maybe you'd actually listen this time if I spoke your mother tongue."

Lamli just smirked, but ze did not try to pull z's wrist back. This made Günter angrier.

"You know you're a freak, right Lamli? An absolute freak of nature. You're a creation of the most unnatural science that has ever existed. You defy the most ancient male-female dichotomy." Lamli scoffed as he said "male-female."

"Well I may be a freak, but you're an idiot if I ever saw one, Günter. That dichotomy doesn't actually exist. It's a figment of your imagination. Just like the fact that you don't want me." Hearing these words, Günter lifted his other hand to strike Lamli, but as he swung, his own wrist was caught by Xiem who had been sleeping nearby and woken at the sound of Lamli's alarm.

"Günter-dijun. One would've thought that after my encounter with Jamuklé, there would no longer be such foolish infighting. There's no room for that here, even for those of differences between bodies."

"Oh? Who the *fuck* made you leader, Xiem?"

"Not that shit again. I'm not *leader*, but clearly I *am* one of the more pragmatic ones here..." Günter wrenched his hand away from Xiem with a heave that almost pulled Xiem off his feet.

"You're lucky you're kind of cute, Xiem. Otherwise I think I might've beaten the shit out of you and Lamli both, bekarna?" Xiem felt his face flush and quickly looked at Lamli who just smirked playfully.

"Hah. At least he warns you before he hits you Xiem, unlike me. You treat me like a dog, don't you Günter?"

"That's enough!" Xiem interjected after recovering from his blush.

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<sup>8</sup> Didn't I tell you never to do this?

“We have to get moving. The mission parameters say we have a transport arriving about 2 miles to the northeast of here in about 30 minutes. That means if we all don’t get ourselves together we’ll be late.”

The fear of what would happen upon tardiness shocked all those awake into action. Lamli got Hanu and Yukiko up, telling them to get dressed quickly. Xiem did the same for Jamuklé, Wilson, and Risam, who, still groggy with sleep, sat up scratching his stomach and yawning.

“Time to get up already, Xi? I feel like I barely slept...”

.....

There are natures deep within our bodies that are so compacted, so contained, that they are only visible in moments of great duress. What you do not understand is that contrary to popular belief, we are often clearest about what “we” are actually “like” when the consistency of reality appears to collapse. What I am saying here is likely going to be very controversial because, for example, it would imply that someone getting ready to jump off a bridge is not “not of sound mind,” but is instead quite realistic about what they are doing and why they are there.

I would argue that Humans do not usually unintentionally put themselves into situations where their safety is compromised because this would be egoistically counterintuitive. It doesn’t make sense why we would believe that people who are on the verge of committing to killing a Human are actually confused or wrong. These types of notions must assuredly be stricken completely and forever. While it may indeed be true that, in the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt the individual reconsiders the situation, this reconsideration does not mean that they were irrationally making the decision. It is irrational to believe that someone that intends to take a life thinks irrationally.

The tendency to believe that the suicidal individual’s mind has been ushered into a state of abnormality is a symptom of the belief that the external forces acting upon the individual are correct. What we are really seeing here is that suicide, and indeed other reality distorting actions like mass murders of any kind, is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the socio-cultural paradigm the individual exists in is not only faulty, but has driven them into such a state of dissociation that there is of course no other choice but to take such action. In other words, it is illogical to ever believe that the inflicting of death is the fault of one sole individual. It is more logical to see that there is something problematic within the system as a whole.

And so you can imagine that it is in these moments that the individual experiences the full visibility of the Self, or perhaps the highest fulfilment of the Self: a clear, undeniable, irreversible action to feed into. No more doubt, no more worry.

.....

There were times when it was not possible to reconcile the fact that my mind, which had not during the course of my childhood ever felt as such, was now somehow entranced by something that was ever outside the confines of my body. That is to say, I could never have imagined my Will becoming so twisted and convoluted – thankfully not irreversibly – by something that a former self really had no care for. The question remains: what is it that we must do to break free of the chains we have bound ourselves in? One part of ourselves has shut the lock tight and when we look for the key, we find our conniving self has hidden it, seemingly irretrievably.

We imagine that it is the childlike parts of ourselves which bring us to the point of taking irrational, Self-destructive actions, but a new realization is appearing in my mind. I think it is very unlikely that my Child self would ever want this state for the Adult. I think it is more likely that a complex flow of internal and external forces incite the Self-effacing behavior involved in extensive drug use.

In the case of Sweet, direct access was thwarted by the fact that I always got it through alternative channels, never through the standard bureaucratic processes. You see, if I were to have applied for access before trying it through other means, my legal ability to get it would be uninhibited. Now, I'm happily unable to pass through the psych evaluation because my tendency towards the Sweet is probably off the charts. There are times when I am driven to utter gratitude that the part of me that is the restrainer, the guilt bearer, the dutiful, still remains to protect me from what I know in my Heart of Hearts is an impulse to use that is very difficult to resist. And I yet resist. Is it my Child self that is trying to save my life?

Unexpectedly, the relationship with Sweet has afforded me insights that would otherwise be elusive. I intimately understand how it has and continues to destroy communities. The answer is simple: the Sweet users destroy themselves by uncontrollably using it to excess because they have not the tools or perspective to understand what has happened to their reasoning. Upon any amount of repeated usage, one's reward pathways in the brain are completely

rewired to identify the Sweet as the source of satisfaction, instead of pleasurable actions themselves. Activities that might have been incredibly enjoyable at one point are now rendered seemingly pointless, useless, devoid of pleasure. Sweet usage is something that might have at one point been called a sin: foolhardily engaging in a practice that incites one to believe that all actions are okay, everything feels good. What a horrific lie to be entangled in. I can only hope that I never see it again as long as I live.

.....

The transport was a standard issue eight seater hovercraft, constructed almost completely of carbon nanotube composite, except for the retractable reinforced bulletproof glass entry cover. Inside the craft were storage compartments for each passenger's belongings. One had the ability to take manual control of the craft, but this was usually only allowed in emergencies. The override codes changed at random intervals, and could only be requested through the Forces' keygen interface in the Song app.

"Who wants to sit shotgun?" Risam broke the awkward silence that had settled into the group as they emerged from the forest near to where the hovercraft waited, its hybrid solar/fuel-cell engine making almost no noise save for a near-inaudible high pitched whir.

"There's no shotgun, Risam...there's no pilot!" Yukiko said with a little laugh in her voice.

"Duhh. I just mean who wants to sit at the front?" No one replied. It's not as if the front seats were any better than the other seats, the outside was visible from any position. It just didn't seem like anyone was in the mood to enjoy themselves.

"Fine, in that case...—" Risam threw his bag into the craft and climbed in. The others looked at each other, then moved to follow suit. Uninterestingly enough, Squad partners sat next to each other as one would expect.

Risam reached for the command console.

"Everyone settled?"

The others voiced their assent, so Risam pushed a control button which instructed the hovercraft to contact the nearest Forces' broadcast station from which the craft would obtain navigation and other types of routing directives such as weather or traffic. There were of course other hovercrafts in the sky.



The craft started emitting a low beeping sound letting the passengers know the retractable top was now closing. After it latched into the opposing side, the high pitched whirr increased in volume as the hybrid engine revved into action. Soon, a knocking could be heard as the magnetic field inducer came to life. The craft promptly lifted off the ground and continued to rise until it was now above the treetops. From this altitude, those assembled could see the broken house in the clearing. Somehow it already seemed nostalgic to look at, and each felt a pall of seriousness descend. Maybe it was because they never really had homes of their own. Or, perhaps it was because somehow the previous night of drinking and levity would ultimately not occur again for some time, if ever.





## Part Two: Sarundor<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Xamagen for “to possibly happen.”



Here is why a Human's identity is none of anyone's business really: Humans are *all* horrid creatures, in the end. It is honestly mind boggling why people would spend time vilifying or scrutinizing an individual's personal, private inclinations when truly hideous aspects of Human nature go unchecked. I'm appalled at what I read in history books. Apparently, laws criminalizing so-called "alternative and deviant behaviors," as well as "religious justifications," were essentially used to ostracize fellow Humans for thousands of years.

And here is why I say horrid: it is *abhorrent* that those of the same species would accuse the living of wrongness in the name of beings that have yet to or do not exist. What, you think we actually matter enough to continue as a Race? How oxymoronic. Why would Humanity ever deserve to continue if we cannot integrate those of us that are already living? And yes of course, please do take my reasoning to its fundamental conclusion if you will: the incontrovertible scientific realization of the Unity of the Human Race renders all forms of segregation, racism, and prejudice against other Humans as not only illogical, but also they must ultimately be seen as unreasonable in the barest sense of the word.

My father once told me a story from when he was younger:

The weather was just turning crisp, cold. This chill inspiring relief from what had been an almost unbearably hot summer, but it was also for certain that a cruelly freezing winter was due. There had been such extremes for years now, and bit by bit people were getting more nervous about it. Well to be clear, it happened to be around when people *really* started getting nervous about it.

It was in fact an evening at the beginning of September and my father had just left a queer bar happily tipsy. Or at least, even though he decided to stay on his own for the evening, he was happy to have found a new place he could chill at. He began to walk back towards his apartment...

"Huh, you're gonna walk in front of me now, faggot?" Faggot used to be a common pejorative word for men attracted to other men. He had apparently walked into the path of an incredibly attractive pair of metrosexual guys. My father did not react to the words, and the other one who hadn't spoken said nothing else himself. It took every bit of his will not to lash out and tell them off. He had been taught the power of silence.

"Oh shit maybe I shouldn't say that so loud..." The one who had spoken reconsidered after his friend did not seem to agree at all with the original choice of words.

Damn straight you fucking shit! There's no room for that kind of talk in the Coming World.

So he said to me.

And in many ways, he ended up being right about the world. There isn't anyone who cares about who fucks whom anymore, and the words used to define Humans of different "sexualities" have largely fallen out of use.

One wonders why it took so long to stop being a problem in the first place. In any case, it's a testament to how painfully backwards Humans can be when it comes to transferring what are ultimately private matters to the jurisdiction of the public. I'm just thankful I never had to grow up in that environment...how horrible that must have been. I can kind of imagine what it was like though – it's not like people are kind to each other now.

On the other hand, I cannot tolerate the perversion of the Human body that has taken place through science, this "neutral gender." It has become increasingly clear to me that they are creatures which aren't definably Human. How can a Human be both male and female at the same time? It just doesn't make sense. I wonder what my father felt when around the time when they first developed the "Neutral Genetic Map," the research which would eventually unlock the ability to create "new Humans" that would be able to choose their sexual phenotype at will. Maybe my father would be more tolerant than I am...but he never had to deal with one like I do.

Now I know that intersex lifeforms exist elsewhere in nature, but when it comes to Humans, and especially within the context of Human relationships, our initial attraction to a romantic interest is based on a very complex range of factors, one of which I am sure is gender defined. How am I to know if I'm in a relationship with a man, as I wanted, or a neutral gender that is hiding their ability to shift?

My autonomy for deciding the gender of my partner is snatched away from me by the neutrals. Take Lamli for example. That monster has tried many times to have its way with me. Don't get me wrong – it is hard to resist. Lamli's body is delicious to say the least, but as soon as I start thinking of z's changing z's genitalia on me, I immediately feel ill that I ever gave it a thought. The Truth is that Lamli will never be anything more than a workhorse in my eyes. Maybe someday there'll be someone in z's life that can see past what I cannot. In the meantime, ze better stay the fuck away from me. I don't know what I'll do if ze comes for me again. Assault is assault, no matter what.

.....

Insu woke with a start. Her earthcolored skin was drenched with cold sweat. The sheets beneath her were the kind of damp sheets get when you've been sweating all night. It seemed she had had difficult dreams.

The fact of the matter was that a Gathering occurred the night before and no good news was given. The Cove had been discovered. It wasn't clear exactly how this had happened, but it had. And now there was nothing to do but defend – an offensive operation was out of the question, there weren't enough people. And besides, no one here was really of the combative type. How they would go about defending, though, was an entirely different problem. The relative isolation of the islands was both a blessing and a curse. If The Cove infrastructure on one island fell, there would be other ones to hide on, and Insu was sure that they would be unfamiliar to anyone who tried to navigate them.

On the other hand, the remoteness prevented any potential ally from delivering aid. Insu chuckled to herself, though it came out sounding like a snort. It's not like there were many allies left, if there were any at all. And here she thought she had made it after having secured passage to Ryukyu, the very last bastion of Spirituality remaining anywhere on Earth. Here, those who remained faithful to any spirit or god could find solace. It was, in effect, a melting pot of different faiths all compacted on a small island chain in what used to be part of a country called Japan, and before then it was even an independent kingdom. Insu had always considered it a gift of Earth Mother that Ryukyu had been abandoned after The Rift.

With a heavy sigh, Insu pushed herself up and got out of bed. There were preparations to be done and she was the only one with enough Will to initiate them. She walked from the low lying bed over to her oaken armoire in the corner of the room. The entire area of the chamber was about twice as long and wide as a "first class cabin" of one of those airplanes she had seen in Pre-Rift history books. In those days, people were often segregated into two classes of service on aerial transports. How strange!

The Cove had been built underground, and while the tunneling was better than rudimentary, none of the personal rooms were that large. Most of the workhours spent on construction had been used for developing the structures essential in supporting a balanced lifestyle: the Gathering Hall, the cafeterias, the hospital, the nursery, and the school chambers, among others. Individual inhabitants of The Cove were allowed to dig on their own, providing that they received approval from engineers that would check for structural stability.

Insu opened up the armoire, revealing a body-length mirror in which she looked at herself in the pale glowlight. She had barely any body fat, there wasn't enough food for it...and there certainly wouldn't be enough for a while now...



She looked into her own eyes in the mirror, shook herself from these useless thoughts, pulled on synthetic fabric undergarments, and donned a turquoise robe with purplish blotches on it – the dress code of The Cove. She had a meeting scheduled in about half an hour to discuss the sorry state of things. The main problem seemed obvious: The Cove had been infiltrated by spies. Or at least *a* spy. There was just no way their exact location could have been identified unless there were a spy: The Cove was deep enough below ground such that no motion or substantial heat signatures could be detected by satellites, and in conducting supply gathering missions, only a few people were sent out at a time. These operations only involved interacting with neutral parties on the former-Taiwan or the more autonomous part of former-Japan, now both part of Flagstand Seven.

The first alert had been the ship that had appeared mysteriously off the coast of Miyakojima last week. It was suspicious because it hadn't been flying an identifying flag of any kind.

"Oh, Mothers, what do you have in store for us now?" She whispered quietly to the darkened room.

A few minutes later and Insu is strolling down the hallways of The Cove, the low-intensity blue of the glowlights illuminating the cave walls, Insu's lithe figure giving one the impression that she was actually floating or gliding instead of walking. Normally there would be other inhabitants around at this time of day, but ever since that ship appeared, people had either begun to flee or were largely keeping to themselves, waiting for further directives. Insu knew: only the most faithful would remain. It was strange, in some ways, that Ryukyu had ended up like this. Many of the refugees were committed to religions that enshrined promised lands elsewhere in the world. But now, Ryukyu had become an adopted promised land.

Her arrival at the Gathering Hall door happened faster than she expected. Insu supposed her mind hadn't been this preoccupied since the founding of The Cove years ago. She placed her palm on the key access plate and spoke her password.

"Covegi zaorsarundorinsa."<sup>10</sup> The lock panel flashed green around her palm, then dimmed as the bolts pulled away and the door slid open to reveal a room with a large wooden table in it. Seated around the table were two women and a man, each in the same multicolored robes as Insu.

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<sup>10</sup> May The Cove yet live.

“Asparu xozá, Insu.<sup>11</sup> I imagine you have not slept well?” The eldest woman, Gurana, the leathery texture of her skin somehow preventing a full smile to stretch across her face, greeted Insu with her usual unwelcome wryness. It was well known by now that Gurana was a just a tad jealous of Insu’s youth and rank within The Cove.

“Asparu xozá...no, Gurana, it was the best night’s sleep I’ve ever had.” Insu wasn’t in the mood to deal with Gurana.

“Come on you two, there’s no need for bickering, that’s the last thing we need right now, as I’m sure you realize,” said the other woman at the table. She was younger than Gurana but slightly older than Insu. Insu noted her red hair, blue eyes and freckles created a pretty contrast with Gurana’s amber skin and pale brown eyes. Some said they both may have originally come from the same place, but origin stories weren’t important after coming to The Cove—only that you were here now.

“I know Ohelti, I was just trying to liven up the mood...” Insu glided over to a seat at the other end of the table from those already at their places. The man, of similar physical stature to the women, but somehow looking even thinner, had cream-colored skin with a dash of a birthmark at the jaw. He spoke up.

“I’d been going over various evacuation maps for the different Cove branches.” The man pulled out what looked like an older version of a myPhone and tapped the screen a few times, cueing an overhead 3D projector to display the topography of the islands. Red dots marked the placement of populated Cove bases, while blue dots marked unused infrastructure. Since the ship appeared, the number of blue dots had tripled in quantity. Looking at them, Insu felt a sense of bittersweet...it had taken years to develop this safe haven, and although they always knew they wouldn’t live in Peace forever, somehow recently it had seemed it would be like that. It was like they had almost made it, and now their lives were being ripped away.

“Cantai, what are the chances we’ll be able to evacuate and hide if necessary?”

Cantai closed his eyes for a few moments, then opened them and looked at Insu dead on.

“Insu-muima,<sup>12</sup> it is inevitable that an evacuation will lead to casualties if armed conflict ensues. Most of The Cove inhabitants do not have combat training, even less are in the physical condition required to make these island

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<sup>11</sup> Good morning, Insu.

<sup>12</sup> Muima = Great mother

jumps rapidly. If you were going to take any action, it would have to be preemptive—separating the people into the uncharted islands before any One World Forces arrive. And this action doesn't even account for the spy among us.”

Each person at the table visibly straightened their posture at the mention of a spy. Measures had been taken to ensure that none of those assembled was the spy. The method was, of course, to conduct a blood oath while on LSD. It was statistically improbable that anyone among those gathered here would be the spy...the mental fortitude required to pass through such an event as a liar was unimaginable.

“We'll deal with the spy later. For now, I agree with you, we need to begin dispersing the inhabitants across the satellite islands.” Insu was glad Cantai and Ohelti were there to balance out the negative energy Gurana was putting into an already difficult situation. It had been Cantai originally that had intercepted One World Forces chatter regarding the islands. He had written a myPhone program that listened for any mention of Ryukyu in a variety of languages, and it had also been his idea to listen into the unencrypted shortwave spectrum. The wavelength had begun to be used again in recent years for some reason.

The low hum of the glowlights was all that could be heard above the silence between the figures, looking in each other's general direction, but not committing to look at any individual in particular. It would be accurate to say there was much to be talked about, but no one had the stomach to push the words out of their mouth, and their minds were instead drifting towards other, more attractive places. Cantai, to his lover Lutan's bed. Lutan always knew exactly how to distract him well. Ohelti, her newly planted sprouts – they brought a lovely freshness to the damp Cove air. Gurana, the embrace of her life-partner three years deceased. Sometimes she could feel him just by closing her eyes and shutting out everything else...and then there was Insu. Solitary Insu wasn't distracted at all by the things breaking the concentration of her mates. In fact, as she stared down these people, who had come such a long way in helping each other establish the Peace that The Cove now embodied, she realized only she could pull them back to the task, as she had in days past.

“Cantai, pass me your myPhone.” Insu held out her arm and waited for Cantai to get up and walk over to her. With Cantai's myPhone in hand, Insu instructed the projector to display the L-shaped island of Ishigaki where the main Cove base had been built. Then, she drew an arrow from Ishigaki all the way west to the furthest island, Yonaguni.

“Ohelti and Cantai, you need to, without delay, begin gathering the Ishigaki residents that cannot defend themselves and move them to the underground safe houses we built on Yonaguni. I’m sure you two remember the access codes?” They nodded, and said “Nadar, muima,” in unison. They had been the ones to set the codes in the first place.

“Gurana, you’ll gather together whatever weapons we have remaining at our disposal. I know you mentioned once that you had a stockpile of unused laserships?” Gurana just grunted and nodded, saying nothing further. She knew that Insu wasn’t trying to order her around—she was only suggesting the actions that Gurana might take. It still sounded like an order though.

“Muima, what will you do?” Cantai asked in his lilting mid-range voice. Insu waited a moment before responding, looking to each of the figures in front of her with more grace than before, instead of the piercing glare she had started with. These were indeed the eyes of what Humans might have at one point called a “goddess.”

“I will rally together all the remaining able-bodied individuals and move them to the safe house base on Miyakojima. The OWF, at least as far as we can tell, has singled out Ishigaki as if it were our only main base. Ideally, they do not know of the safehouses, as we’ve never discussed them outside of this room.” She paused to consider another thought, then said, “In addition, I’ll think up a way to weed out the spy. Call me biased, but I doubt it’s a woman or mother who has betrayed us.”

They didn’t need to call her biased – all members of The Cove were known by each of them personally. Many of The Cove’s women were pregnant or had children. It didn’t make much sense that they would endanger their family’s lives resorting to espionage. The remaining childless women were direct relatives of those who had kids. There was obviously a higher chance that a man was the spy—a particularly vile one at that.

“I must ask, considering the circumstances, that you leave the process of elimination to me. If it comes to it, I may have to oversee a psychedelic blood ritual for the men. Do any of you have objections to this?” They all shook their heads, no. Normally there would be a formal vote, since there was a limited supply of psychs. Gurana spoke her mind in Xamagen.<sup>13</sup>

“Yivo wilornso maja sarundor.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The internal name for “One World Speech.” Recall that the ‘x’ is pronounced like a throaty ‘ch.’

<sup>14</sup> May your will be done.

Insu felt her body tighten as she realized they had placed such deep faith in her. She, a mere Human, could barely handle the responsibility associated with such faith. But, she discretely regained her composure, made a fist with her left hand, covered it with her right, holding them near her sternum—the conventional handsign of agreement across the world—and said resolutely, without any air or sound of indecisiveness, “Eto yimevonso sarundorinsa xulo.”<sup>15</sup>

.....

Have you ever felt hunger such that you’d rather bleed to death than feel the pain of the pangs any longer? Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to totally lose control of your body, yet still remain inside of it, adrift within your own skin as if you were a boat on a sea beneath shattered sky? How can there possibly be so many ways to live a life?

It was these kinds of questions, or more clearly, my ability to ask them, that made me seriously doubt whether or not the world I was living in was an illusion. There was a time when these questions were not so developed or significant. A time when I never wondered what it would be like to be another person. Well, to be perfectly honest, it’s not just about being “another person,” but also wondering what it would be like if I weren’t a person at all – what would it be like if I weren’t anything?

And all these Humans...all these *Humans!* Roaming around to and fro like little brainless bugs. Except they do have brains don’t they? With all sorts of inane opinions. I can’t for the life of me imagine how it can be this way.

When I was growing up, I had this distinct feeling of alarm. I felt that whatever forces were preventing people from committing acts of violence against each other, they were more fragile than they appeared. What does it really mean to be a law-abiding citizen? Why is it that, if I am wronged in some way—say, something is stolen from my shop, or even, I’m knocked to the side as I’m trying to make the train—what is preventing me from slicing away the hand of the thief, or stabbing the responsible party in the arm? It just doesn’t make any sense. Except if you somehow realize exceptional productivity is only possible through cooperation. Ultimately, it seems people would rather believe in laws than in common sense.

I hear that at one point there may have been a book that stated, in all frankness, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” When in the world was it ever

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<sup>15</sup>And may yours be done as well.

decided, then, that this axiom was no longer valid? Because an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind? Don't make me laugh. This would only be a world where we are too unenlightened to stop going after each other for petty, unproductive reasons. Otherwise, we're better off blind if you ask me.

.....

The hovercraft floated silently over what had at one point been called New York City. After the takeover by the One World Government, the city had been turned into a Semi-Autonomous Zone. It was allowed to elect its own local leadership, but beyond that it was largely controlled by the central government. Yukiko, who had an avid hobby of studying Pre-Rift architecture, was gazing down at the view below with absolute pleasure. After The Rift, the city had gotten to keep its original buildings for the most part. She nudged Hanu, who was sitting next to her, to make him look down at the former One World Trade, now simply called "Flagbearer," being that the OWG's rainbow flag stood billowing above the gigantic building.

"Look at that, Hanu...see how the sunlight gleams down the length almost uniformly? They were thinking of that when they built the thing...a gleaming pillar of light..."

Hanu gave it a quick look, but he didn't share Yukiko's avid interest in buildings. He would have been fine if all Pre-Rift buildings had been dismantled and new ones constructed in their place, using the One World energy efficiency techniques that had been developed over the past decade. But then that would make Yukiko sad, wouldn't it? She clearly had some reason for paying attention to how ancient structures were built.

"Yuki, why do you care about old buildings so much?" He asked her without turning to face her. Yukiko just hummed a short giggle and said, "Well, it's one of the few ways to see what design motifs the Ancients thought were important. Buildings require a huge undertaking to complete, so they are usually the result of a great deal of consideration for the styles of the time."

Xiem heard the conversation and silently agreed. It didn't make sense to take down structures that worked well. What was that old saying? "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"? Well, it was true for buildings too. He felt a sense of pride that the One World Government hadn't dismantled the city below. What a waste that would have been.

He looked down now too, and saw nearby Flagbearer were two square shaped holes in the Earth. They marked the buildings that had originally been

there, the “Twin Towers,” brought down by airplanes, marking what most now considered the beginning of The Rift: September 11, 2001 – the day when some members of one Organized Religion declared total war on Secular Society. Xiem recalled reading that no one had thought of it as such back then; they simply saw it as one event in a string of casualty filled conflicts with the region of the world formerly titled “the Middle East.”

A shiver ran down Xiem’s spine. How could people not have seen such a well-calculated action as something different...something new? What in the world was wrong with people at the time? If only they had seen that the problem was much larger, deeper – a question of combating ideologies! Then maybe the conflict that ensued could have been mitigated to some extent, instead of the deep carnage of The Rift. Xiem shook himself out of his musings. The past could obviously not be changed. But, the analysis of it could always be better.

The craft was now passing by the former Statue of Liberty, which now, instead of a torch, held the banner of the OWG, a massive rainbow-striped flag with seven large outlines of five-pointed stars arranged in a circle. The stripes symbolized the Human Identity Spectrum, while the stars represented the Seven Continents and the Five Great Tendencies of Humanity. Xiem’s breast filled with pride at the sight, and he, without asking anyone else if they cared or not, began reciting the One World Anthem to himself quietly, his hand pressed against his chest over his heart. The beat felt strong beneath his palm. As he sang, the others placed their hands over their hearts instinctively as well.

*Seven Flagstands, a billion hearts a’beating,  
The thrum of the World in blend!  
Gazing upon all that has been,  
Leaning towards all that will be:  
When I see such Beauty all laid bare,  
I ask for nothing beyond!*

The craft turned due north now, as it was going to take a polar route over the top of the Earth to get to the islands now displayed on a chart in front of Risam’s seat – he was monkeying with the command screen out of boredom. There wasn’t much to play around with. Without the override controls, the user was limited to being able to view the route map and control a few cabin functions. He noticed that the total flight time would be roughly twelve hours. This was disappointing considering no one had actually brought anything

delicious to eat in the interim, nor had they the opportunity to thoroughly bathe, judging by how the cabin smelled. The available food would likely be OWF standard freeze-dried rations and calorie-rich bars.

The monotonous whirr of the hovercraft was slowly putting most of them to sleep, which was good as a matter of fact. They had been instructed to adjust themselves to the time zone across the Earth by sleeping for about half of the flight. Xiem tapped a button which immediately engaged the light screen. Because they were taking a polar route, the sun would be beaming on them throughout the entire trip unless they used something to filter the light. It seemed like the others appreciated the gesture, and shortly after the cabin dimmed, each member reclined their seat and slept.

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The shadows obscured what was actually the pale, slim body of Hermis unclothed in the Activation Chamber. He gazed upon what was the culmination of many years of labor. This Chamber was essentially a round bronze-colored platform with an empty basin in the middle of it. Around the edges of the platform were some X-shaped structures, each with small circular indentations on the branches, equidistant from each other.

Hermis walked up to one of the structures and ran his hand along it, lovingly. Just seeing it finally complete caused an increase in his heart rate; he could feel it fluttering there wantonly, because of course the only thing that remained was to complete the ritual. There would be no other comparable event ever seen in the world, never before, and never after. And it would all be to himself and for himself. The method to achieve this was never officially set into practice. This was the problem with Chaos Events. But Hermis' birth, his Will to Power, his desire, it all culminated here.

He crossed his arms, walked towards the center basin and looked inside it. A glowlight shed its pale across the shine of the silver-toned basin such that you could almost see his reflection in it. The image was slightly distorted though. Hermis didn't look at it for too long, unless he be convinced this was what his face really looked like.

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Wilson woke with a start, and for a moment he felt paralyzed from having been in the same position for so long. With a bit of Willpower, he edged himself forward and then leaned over to rouse Jamuklé from her slumber. Her



eyes slowly opened, and she peered into the face of Wilson, who was wearing his usual concerned face.

“Jamuklé, look...we’re over Flagstand Seven.”

It was true. They were indeed over what was, at one point, called the Northern Capital.<sup>16</sup> It was, along with Flagstand One, one of the major capital cities of One World. This city had more sprawling concrete than Flagstand One, but it was also spread out over a larger area, such that the center contained many glowing spires of central government and business buildings, from which radiated low lying swirls of beige and grey. It would certainly bring back memories from when Wilson and Jamuklé first met, right here.

It was the evening of graduation day from the One World Field Academy Flagstand Seven and the cadets were rejoicing in their newly gained status. Their lives would no longer be about the commitment to learning in a classroom, nor running through training simulations, but instead would be, from here on out, about giving themselves completely to the cause of One World. Wherever there was trouble or concern, wherever a citizen needed Help, a cadet (now rightfully called “dijun”!) would be there.

Jamuklé let herself give a rare smile...at the time, she hadn’t really known Wilson at all. They were in the same graduating class, but she could never have known that it would be Wilson, who had been watching her from a distance for the longest time, that would come to her aid. It was that evening, amongst the festivities and drinking of the cadets, Jamuklé found herself outnumbered in a dark janitor’s closet by what we could call a gang of horny and drunk only-just-men.

And it was, in the Grand Hall of the Academy, which for this one evening was cordoned off to be limited for the graduates to do what they willed, Jamuklé, with her masculine yet soft features, was a target in the eyes of many, yet she never did give herself to anyone since her body had yet to feel right. And it would only be her choice, in the end, to give herself once it did. But it was in this case that the men cornered her in a side room, away from the Hall with its high timbered walls.

Don’t misunderstand: it wasn’t that Jamuklé couldn’t hold her own – on the contrary, she had at one point won the Academy Prize for having fended off as many as three men and four women at once on three separate occasions – but six large guys, plus the fact she was herself somewhat inebriated, led to what was at that point seemingly a despicably inescapable situation.

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<sup>16</sup> In English, this used to be called “Beijing.”

The men took their time. Their greedy, somehow handsome faces turned to full lust as two of them silently peeled away her clothes and three others held her still, while yet another pulled his pants down baring horribly muscular legs, the kind that if it were not for this violation Jamuklé might have actually liked had he asked her in the proper way, but then she couldn't think about that because now his hands were upon her, they were around that disgraceful appendage she felt, there, she couldn't control the arousal since they knew better than to not be delicate as they bound her mouth with *sommelcord*.<sup>17</sup> Why is it that such horrible things can feel so good? Why is it that we aren't, when push comes to shove, truly in control of our thought processes? And why was it here, with her, that they played with *someone* like *something*?

And then the door burst open with Wilson and his newly licensed lasershiv gleaming in the pale of the light bleeding into the side room, and he gleefully slashed the desecrators of what was, and still continues to be, the sole target of his affection. Fuck the fact that Jamuklé didn't feel right in her body, he, Wilson, would never see her as anything more or less than a Human, and what a lovely Human she was. So it was for sure that blood did seep down to the floor from the man with the bared legs as they had both been slashed to the bone, and it was also for certain that he held the man at his neck as an example to the others lest they choose to stay. They did not.

For a moment, he held her closely, and somewhat selfishly he took the prize of having saved her, the deep embrace of a lover, but it was also he saw what might be the only chance for him to truly express himself to her.

"You're...Wilson-dijun ya?" Wilson smiled and nodded vigorously. She had said his name!

"Ha, I am." Wilson could scarcely speak so close was he to her face.

"Well...can you let me pull up my pants at least?" Wilson immediately pulled away in embarrassment. In the heat of the moment he'd forgotten...

Jamuklé, noticing this, helped him out by saying, "Don't worry about it dijun—"

"Nah, don't worry about formality. Just call me Wilson. Did they—"

"No, you caught them just in the nick of time...although they were close. Close enough that I'm a tad sore."

They looked at each other for a moment, as the adrenaline ebbed away. They realized it was a bit chilly here in the back room.

"Want to go back outside?" Wilson asked softly.

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<sup>17</sup> Sommel is the Xamagen word for a type of flat braided or woven pattern.

“How about...we get outta here? We can have our own party elsewhere...” said Jamuklé. Wilson could hardly contain himself from the swell rising in his chest, as he jumped up and held out his hand to her.

“Yeh, let’s go.”

These were the memories that flooded through them as they hovered above the place where they had formed a Squad. It was here that they applied as a team to the elite graduate training program that filtered them into the Squadron which they found themselves in today, still together, thick as thieves. By this time, Wilson knew that it would be a while before Jamuklé would want the intimacy he craved, but at least like this, he could be near her till death do them part. Which is what he wanted in any case. This was, beyond the mission they found themselves on now, the True Mission he had finally identified, and from it he would never stray. They briefly touched their foreheads together and smiled purely at each other as they felt themselves mutually remembering the past.

A faint beeping roused everyone from their thoughts, as the standard OWF computer voice could be heard throughout the cabin,

“Asparu junren-muiha<sup>18</sup>, we will shortly be arriving at our destination. Please be sure that your safety belts are fastened across your chest and lap, and that your belongings are stowed away securely.”

A low tension rose in the bellies of all those assembled. Though their stress tolerance was high from the many missions they had all completed before this moment, they had only ever trained for combat in simulations. Their experience should be enough, though. The mission controls stated that they most likely wouldn’t be up against individuals with any combat training.

Everyone was silent, too full of anticipation to speak, except for Risam, who turned around to face everyone else in the cabin and, pushing down the knot in his stomach, asked, “Junren, jorunso xansorya?”<sup>19</sup>

Each Squad member at their partner, then back at Risam and, while making the enclosed fist sign of affirmation, replied in unison, “ha!”

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<sup>18</sup> Asparu = to greet; greetings.

<sup>19</sup> Soldiers, are you ready?

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Berzek's curiosity got the best of him, and so we find him in the recordkeeping room of Central OWF base, Flagstand One. The room pretty much consisted of a flat screened computer sealed behind a reinforced steel door. Because of his new 6<sup>th</sup> Rank status, he was finally allowed to enter into the recordkeeping computer with full access. What was he looking for exactly though?

Berzek knew he couldn't just search for Hermis in the computer, that would raise a flag in the system and Hermis would be alerted almost immediately. So he had to think more about where Hermis had been, and what he might have been doing over the past few years or so. He had heard through the grapevine that Hermis had been involved with routine plugpulls of religious Rogues. But, those were of course made up of mostly infirm people who couldn't even get out of bed, yet had to be plugpulled because their voices could still be heard through the One World Web, or by way of print messages distributed with help from accomplices. While those types of missions were necessary at least to some extent, couldn't they be performed by cadets or low level junren? Why go through all the trouble bringing elite junren to perform non-combat tasks? This fact is what made Berzek the most curious out of everything he wondered about Hermis.

Berzek knew that Hermis was a pervert. With the Legalization of Substances and Fetishes Act of 2036, people engaged in all sorts of debauchery if they wanted to, as long as they kept it within a certain extremely lenient range. The upper echelon though...they weren't subjected to the same Tendency Checks as the rest of the populace. However, many elites were "vulgar" in some way or another, it wasn't just limited to Hermis. No, there was something else about Hermis that rubbed Berzek the wrong way.

Maybe it was the fact that he *overtly* abused his authority. That phone call was the least of it. It was as if he didn't care at all about any consequences. It's not like he was the only one who ran the Forces. On the contrary, Hermis was one of many who managed the affairs of the massive OWF across all of the Flagstands and Minor Regions. Berzek had met many of them as he rose through the ranks, and none of them seemed to care as little about their job as Hermis. Although he must have, until reaching top rank by performing his "service," at the very least feigned deference to the cause of the OWF in order to get there.

An idea flashed through Berzek's mind that struck him so hard it caused him to start perspiring profusely out of excitement. He could start his search by looking at the movements of Hermis' partners instead of Hermis himself. He knew most of them from recent memory. Until Hermis had reached 7<sup>th</sup> Rank and become a Lone Runner, he would have been required, just like every OWF soldier, to be placed with a teammate. He might as well start with the most recent one, his 6<sup>th</sup> Rank partner, Koben Mitar...Mitar, who had somehow not been promoted along with his partner, which was normally the case. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Mitar in some time.

"Let's see, where are you Mitar-slujun?..." Berzek murmured to himself as he typed in Mitar's full name and ID number as he remembered it. The computer entered into the loading screen with the gold glowing circle, similar to the OWF's Song app, and then, since the credentials were correct, he was given a page with what seemed to be a limited amount of information. That was strange—with Berzek's current rank he should definitely be able to see more. He clicked on a tab that said "Mission Records" and scrolled down the page. The content was basically a list of geographical locations that Hermis and Mitar had been. At the very bottom was a plaintext entry: "UNKNOWN."

Berzek sat back in his chair and rubbed his head, his dark brown hair now visibly growing back. He looked at the screen, stumped as to what he should do. The "unknown" designation could mean one of two things: a) the information was unavailable because of his clearance level (unlikely) or b) the information was actually missing. Berzek took a chance and reconfirmed his own identification information and waited as the computer refreshed the page. As before, he scrolled down until he reached the bottom of the page where the entry still said UNKNOWN, but it now seemed like he could click on the entry for more information, which he proceeded to do. He was then presented with a map with a flashing dot above a set of islands off the coast of Flagstand Seven.

Berzek hummed to himself quietly, mostly out of nervousness because he realized that the missing information wasn't the location, but actually the nature and outcome of the missions. He typed in another former partner and, again, was presented with an UNKNOWN line of text, which he was able to click on for more details, and was, as before, given the map of the same island chain, with the same flashing island.

There was just one more thing he needed to check. He typed in the appropriate status query for both of Hermis' 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Rank partners and sat back, wide-eyed: a line of emboldened red text read, Status: **Desertion**.

.....

Kazu was having fun, this was the best fuck he'd had in a while. Most of the women in The Cove were already paired up with someone or didn't want to mess up their babies fucking while pregnant. So those women that were left were scarce indeed. But this girl was great, tight pussy, tits just big enough to cup and comfortably hold. God his cock felt nice and hard in her twitching moistness.

The woman reached up to stroke his left cheek. He took it in his hand, held it for a moment, and smiled at her. Then he slapped her so hard a red mark started forming almost immediately on her delicate skin.

"Don't even think about it. Didn't I tell you I would be the one who said when you could move?" The woman stayed silent and looked at him. She was strong and smart enough not to let him see any emotion. Kazu was hot, which is how she got into this situation in the first place mostly...he looked like a good lay. But he wasn't worth the backhand, not at all.

She started to pull away, but Kazu brought out a lasershiv and pressed it in between her breasts.

"What did I just say?" Kazu said through gritted teeth as he pressed in again. The woman again said nothing, but stopped moving.

"I'm not done with you yet, Sinar." Kazu started thrusting with more vigor – the excitement of having the knife out against her chest was almost too much to bear –...

And then he was finished. Sinar looked at him through narrowed eyes, full of rage.

Hold on a sec.

"Why do you have that knife? Isn't that a lasershiv?" Kazu did not reply, he just proceeded to clean himself off and get dressed.

"Hey, I'm asking you a question." Sinar would not be deterred. "All weapons are supposed to be stored among the muima and muipa. Why do you have one?"

Kazu kept his silence for a moment longer then said, "You'd best keep quiet Sinar, it's none of your business," and then turned to leave her chambers. Sinar leaned forward and grabbed Kazu as he reached for the door.

"Answer me Kazu. Or this is the last time you'll see me bare, I swear it." Kazu paused at the door, turned around and smiled in way that made Sinar feel extremely uncomfortable. He then leaned down to kiss her, moistening his lips with his tongue then pressing them against hers. She did not resist, but she might have been better off if she had, because Kazu pushed the

knife against her stomach and engaged the laser function as he pressed his tongue into her mouth.

It was too late for Sinar, as the lasership cut through to her spine in seconds, and she crumpled to the floor. She was too shocked to scream, asking instead with one of her last breaths, “What’s wrong with you?...”

Kazu, realizing that he at the very least owed her an explanation, stated simply, “When you corner a beast, it has no choice but to defend itself.” Sinar looked up at him, the rage slowly subsiding from her eyes as her spirit left her body, and she was no more.

Kazu spit to the side, mostly in annoyance because he would now have to dispose of a body, which he hadn’t had to do before, and for the fact that he knew he shouldn’t have brought out the shiv. Then Sinar might still be alive. What a waste of good pussy.

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In the beginning there was naught but silence. The Spirit of the Universe floated freely throughout the nothingness and was all and nothing at once. It was Everything, but also part of the Nothing; motion and stillness combined. Life and Death were figments of no one’s imagination; however, every emotion, every possible inclination, every conceivable possibility was contained here, and yet not. But then the Universe realized itself and the Expansion began. The Spirit realized and tried to claw its way back, but it was already too late. The Expansion was already underway, and it would be many billions of years until it would return to nothing; until the darkness of the silence would come again.

These were Insu’s thoughts as she watched the boat sail away to Yonaguni with most of the women and children. Actually, everyone was accounted for except for Sinar. They had searched everywhere for her, but there wasn’t enough time to keep looking for her, not to mention there was a limit to how many resources could be committed to the search at this point. Insu shook her head in disappointment. Why were the people so devoted to Spirituality and Peace still hunted like prey? Why were they doomed to run?

No!...

Insu pulled herself away from such unsettling thinking and turned her mind towards planning out what she would have to do with the men. She realized drastic measures were necessary, and she also realized she only had a limited amount of time before OWF junren reached the island. To top it all off, she would need at least 10 hours to complete the LSD blood ritual. She was resolute that it was her only option—there was no other way for the spy to

confess so quickly. Luckily there were sufficient quantities left for everyone to trip hard enough for the ritual. She clenched her fists and looked towards the Sky, then towards the Earth and Ocean, then back at the boat just as it was leaving her field of vision, murmuring an earnest prayer from deep within her soul, “Ert-muima eto Ten-muima, yigi oki ozesarmustukuxtenso ogoreh. Igeltei nakund, oze zoxistar eudun boltugoreh.”<sup>20</sup>

She turned around from the shore, pulled out her aged myPhone, and engaged the walkie-talkie function. There was one more woman unaccounted for, but only because she was out on a collection. She wasn’t on the mission because she was particularly skilled or anything, but it was unfortunately due to the fact that, ever since that strange ship appeared, no one else would volunteer to leave the safety of The Cove and travel to find more refugees.

“Merna, where are you?” A few moments passed and then Merna’s deep voice echoed through the speaker.

“Muima, I’m about 20 minutes off shore. It’s taken me longer to get back because you instructed me to run the motor on low.”

“That was the right thing to do Merna, we can’t risk your capture. OWF junren could descend on Ryukyu at any moment.”

“Yes, muima, I understand.” Insu smiled at Merna’s calling her “muima.” Merna herself was a few years Insu’s senior, but she hadn’t wanted to take on the responsibilities of leading The Cove, choosing instead to receive fieldwork. More dangerous, as far as Insu was concerned.

“How many did you find on this run?”

A few moments passed before Merna’s voice came again. “Truth be told, there was only one...a child passed on by his mother at one of the meeting points in Flagstand Seven. She knew the password, but would not come herself.”

Insu swore – and she rarely swore. This was no place for a child right now! She would have to work around it.

“Okay Merna. In that case don’t bother coming here, head straight to Yonaguni and meet up with the rest of the women and children.”

“Muima, are you sure---”

“This is *not* up for discussion.” Another rare moment for Insu – she was ordering Merna around. As such, Merna took her seriously and did not argue further.

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<sup>20</sup> Mothers Earth and Sky, give me strength to do what I must. Let me be worthy in your eyes among the faithful.



“Ha, muima. As you will.” The walkie-talkie line went silent. If Insu needed to, she could get back in touch with Merna some other way. Yonaguni was close enough to Ishigaki for transmissions to connect successfully.

Insu turned back towards the shore, and looked at it from where she stood at the edge of a small forest which protected one of the entrances to The Cove from aerial view. Usually the sight of the cool blue water reflecting the depth of the Sky would fill her with comfort from its soothing grace. But, it did not have that effect now. Sighing, she turned around, her robe billowing gorgeously in the wind and sunshine, and pressed the feelings of dread out of her body, filling it instead with a growing sense of determination and purpose.

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Moans of ecstasy, shadows of bodies wracked with pleasure filled the alleys of the sprawling red light district of Flagstand Three. It's July 22, 2053. In the hot, somewhat humid air, Lamli lay with z's back against the wall, listening to z's sisters and brothers complete their work for the day. They weren't related to ze by blood – well, no one really was. Ze had been assembled, like all of the current generation of neutral gendered Humans, by using cells from a variety of donors, mutated and experimented with over many years. It was theoretically possible to trace z'self back to a progenitor mother and father, but the likelihood of meeting them in the flesh was slim. As someone with so few (absolutely zero!) familial relations, ze was free to make ones that ze z'self felt were right.

Ze gave a little huff as if ze actually cared enough to pout, then glanced up as Lutan entered z's chamber, which was basically just a room with one solid wall and a curtain surrounding it, similar to the rest of the rooms in the brothel. Lutan was shirtless and wiping himself off from having finished with his customer. He had apparently left in haste. Lamli reached up for him, suddenly wanting the comfort of someone who seemed to give a damn about ze, the sleeve of z's light blue and white linen robe slipping down z's arm as z's hand clasped his. Lutan smiled handsomely as he looked down at Lamli, his long unkempt blond hair falling across his dark face. Lutan was also of the neutral gender, but he chose to remain male more than 90% of the time, so everyone referred to him using the male pronoun.

“Feeling lonely, Lamli-aela?”<sup>21</sup> Lamli made an annoyed face since ze knew he was being cheeky.

“Not exactly...I just have the feeling you're going to leave us soon.” Lamli wasn't totally sure about that feeling as ze said the words; but, it was for

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<sup>21</sup> Aela = dear one, cf: aelore “to love”

the most part true. Ze had noticed Lutan talking about leaving, going to a place far away from here, for a better, more secluded life.

“Oh ho? Aela, it may not be I who will be the one who leaves first, neh?” Lamli smiled at Lutan’s somewhat awkward mixing of Xamagen and English.

“I suppose you’re right about that...” Ze didn’t have much time to finish the thought because Lutan suddenly pulled ze up towards his chest and held ze there.

“Hey, don’t worry so much. People go in and out of each other’s lives like you wouldn’t believe. One day you’ll be missing someone, then poof! They’re right there in front of you again like you never were apart.” Lamli felt z’s eyes moisten a bit. When had Lutan become so eloquent?

It felt like yesterday that the brothel had taken ze in off the street. Back then, it was nothing more than a ramshackle set of poles and curtains. Lutan had advocated for z’s being allow to stay. The business, having been profitable for some time now, allowed the residents to erect walls around it, lending an air of safety to it uncharacteristic of other unlicensed establishments. Though prostitution was legal in One World since 2036, the licensing fees were often too exorbitant to make any real profit unless there was extraordinary volume.

Lutan pressed his forehead against Lamli’s.

“C’mon, let’s go get some food neh? I just got paid, with a little extra on the top.” Lamli nodded and followed Lutan out of the chamber, still clasping his hand tightly. They headed down narrow winding alleyways through Garçai, the local name for the district, grey concrete walls with laundry hanging high above to dry across the gap between the buildings. Lutan was walking quickly, nearly dragging Lamli along as he picked up the pace.

“Keep up will ya? Gotta stay limber you know,” Lutan said to ze without looking back to z’s face. Lamli wordlessly complied with his request. Ze would not let go of his hand.

They emerged along a large main street, crowded with people going about their afternoon shopping. This was a market that was a mix between day and night markets. In the day, one could find fresh uncooked food, while at night the street would transform into an assortment of food carts from which one could purchase a wide variety of cooked meals. This was useful for those citizens, like Lutan and Lamli, who had no kitchen of their own but could just afford the prices of the local market, since rent was included in their services.

“Yigi wilorinsa hwanso xar?”<sup>22</sup> Lutan asked Lamli, his mouth beginning to salivate slightly. Neither of them had eaten anything yet today.

“I was thinking something we could share.” Lamli used this opportunity to let go of his hand and point over at a dumpling cart nearby.

“How about two orders of that guy’s teiba chicken dumplings?”<sup>23</sup> Lutan cocked his head to the side, seriously considering whether or not he’d like to have something else, then started walking over to the cart without another word. Lamli followed him, smirking a bit at how Lutan would go ahead and do things without speaking once he had decided to do them. One day, ze hoped to be that strong. For Lamli felt, not totally incorrectly, that someone who could take action without explaining themselves was somehow more powerful than other people who would announce what they were about to do. What ze didn’t realize was that this wasn’t a sign of strength so much as Lutan’s one-mindedness.

The dumplings were cheap and plentiful – twelve came in one order, and the sauce was free. Lamli took z’s time, picking each dumpling and chewing slowly, savoring as the oils and meat were pressed into each crevice of z’s mouth. Lutan ate his first six at breakneck pace, sauce dribbling down his chin a bit. Lamli laughed at the sight, and used her thumb to wipe away some of it.

“You should slow down, you might choke!” Lamli said with a semi-concerned tone.

“Don’t worry, I can handle quite a bit in my throat at once thank you very much,” Lutan replied with a grin.

“Eww, Lutan you’re gross,” Lamli shot back.

“Na, aela, you’re the one who imagined something gross at what I said.” At that, Lamli kicked him hard in the shin. Lutan was about to do the same, when he noticed ten 3<sup>rd</sup> Ranked OWF soldiers come down the street and stop in front of the alley system that would lead to central Garçai. He knew they were 3<sup>rd</sup> Rank because of the three bright multi-colored stripes on each of the right upper arms of their uniforms.

“Neh, Lamli, doesn’t that seem kind of strange?” Lutan said, gesturing with his chin towards the group of soldiers.

“Yeah it is. Soldiers usually only come down here in smaller groups, if at all, right?” Lutan just nodded, and quickly finished up his dumplings. Lamli did the same, then turned z’s body to look at the group with him. The brigade

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<sup>22</sup> What would you like to eat?

<sup>23</sup> Teiba = special

seemed to be finished discussing amongst themselves, because they turned to head down the alley.

“Let’s head back home, neh? It’s probably nothing but, we should just make sure...” Lamli agreed with him, though it’s not like they could be of much help. Neither of them was trained in combat.

They hopped off the low stone wall they’d been sitting on and took a slightly different path through the alleys. They knew a shortcut to get back to the brothel faster than the soldiers. Even though the path would allow them more than enough time by walking, Lutan started to jog and Lamli followed suit. They quickly worked up a sweat in the afternoon heat, they could feel the dampness spread across their bodies as the air met with the moisture on their skin. The rubber-soled shoes they wore had poor traction on the cracked concrete, which was wet from a bit of rain that had fallen earlier in the morning, so there was a little slip here or as they made haste.

Just a few minutes more and they arrived back at the brothel, somewhat short of breath, and ran to the back of the establishment to notify the muima and muipa. They reached the back office and burst through the wooden door, forgetting that it would normally be locked...

“Oh ho, what do we have here?” A tall soldier turned to look at them, an assault rifle pointed towards the muima, her mascara running down her face, silent as the grave. Lamli and Lutan froze, mouths agape. The soldiers were already here? How had they gotten here before them? Unless...

“Muima, other soldiers are on their way here. Where’s muipa?” Lamli surprised z’self by speaking up.

“Aya, zuyvo<sup>24</sup>, they’ve already taken him away. You grab the other workers and flee before more arrive. Don’t worry about me, aela,” said the muima, filled to the brim with confidence she had honed of the many years of being in this business. Why had she been crying, then?

“Muima, we will not leave you here with this savage dog!” Lutan cried, and lunged forward to grab the soldier’s assault rifle, getting it squarely within his hands. The soldier was unphased.

“You’d better let go of that if you know what’s good for ya. My business is with your muima here, and her alone.”

Lutan narrowed his eyes to mere slits and looked up into those of the junren.

“This is my home, and that is my muima. What son do you know of that would leave their mother to the wolves?” The soldier tsked in reply, then

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<sup>24</sup> Zuyvo = My child

shoved Lutan into the wall. The back of his head made a sickening crack as it connected with the concrete. But Lutan did not lose consciousness, instead he gripped the gun ever harder as blood began to run down his neck, turning the shoulders of his linen robe a deep crimson.

“Lutan! Let go, he’ll kill you!” Lamli shrieked at full volume.

“No, aela, you take muima and get out of here.”

“Lutan-xuyvo,<sup>25</sup> don’t try to be brave.” The muima said in resolute voice. “You’re young – you don’t deserve to end your life so early.”

Tears began to stream down Lutan’s face.

“What meaning is there living in a world where you had not the strength to defend the only ones you’ve ever loved?”

The muima was about to reply to his question, when loud screams could be heard further back in the building. The other soldiers were here! Lutan, momentarily distracted, let his grip on the gun slightly relax, which the soldier, having been trained to recognize such moments of weakness, took as an opportunity to grab it out of his hands and shove him against the wall again, the butt of the gun knocking the wind out of Lutan. He crumpled to the ground, holding his sides, gasping for air he could not take in. Lamli ran to his side, picking him up so he could elongate his torso and take in more breath.

Three soldiers entered the room, each of them were now wearing standard-issue helmets with lightscreen visors that could be deployed across the face. The tint was such that you could not see the visage, only a shadow of it, so the soldiers looked like clones of each other.

The muima stayed behind her desk, showing absolutely no fear, while she gestured silently with her hand for Lamli to bring Lutan to her side. Lamli complied with her request, then waited for what ze felt would be swift judgement.

One of the soldiers with the visors spoke up, turning towards the one who had crushed Lutan’s skull. “Hermis-fujun. We have secured the establishment. We wait on further orders from you.”

Hermis replied in what Lamli felt at the time was somehow an enchanting voice, even though he had done something despicable to her friend.

“Ha, godo ajil junren.”<sup>26</sup> Hermis turned to look at the three behind the desk. He grinned a smile of someone that believes they are totally in control of someone else’s destiny.

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<sup>25</sup> Xuyvo = my son

<sup>26</sup> “Okay, good job soldiers.”

“Take the muima here, she is the main target.” He looked directly at the muima and clarified, “You know the law, muima. The punishment for the culpability of the proprietor of the unlicensed establishment is based on years of operation and employees in service.”

Then he looked at Lutan and Lamli. According to the law, he had to notify them of the reason for their arrest as well.

“You two, you look underage. Am I right?” Neither of them would give Hermis the benefit of a reply.

“Well I’ll just assume you are, because then your punishments will be more...lenient. But you are still charged with aiding and abetting the function of an unlicensed business.” He turned back to the other soldiers.

“Separate them from the muima, and bring them to central lockup, bekarna<sup>27</sup>?”

“Nadar, Hermis-fujun!” The OWF trijun hastily complied with his request, their strength more than enough to grab Lamli and Lutan away from the muima, who had held them closely when she heard they would be split up.

“No, muima! I won’t leave you!” Lutan struggled in the arms of his captor. It was no use though, both his and Lamli’s hands had been bound with ultra-strong sommelcord. The muima shushed him.

“Stop that Lutan. Don’t make things worse. If we’re lucky, we’ll meet again someday.”

They were at this point all dragged outside the brothel. Lamli looked around at z’s brothers and sisters being thrown into vehicles destined for what ze assumed would be central lockup. Hermis came outside as well, having finished his search inside the building, now surveying the scene he had created.

“Put the two neutrals that were in the office into my transport. I’ve met my quota for the month with this catch.” He paused to consider for a moment. Then, he made that shit-grin again. Lamli felt z’s heart sink the lowest it had ever felt, lower than the day when ze first became homeless.

“Oh actually, separate them. You take the male-looking neutral and I’ll go with the other one.” Lamli and Lutan looked at each other and tried to grab for each other’s bodies, but it was futile because they could not make use of their hands. Lamli and Lutan were promptly pulled towards separate transports.

“Don’t worry Lamli, I *will* see you again aela! The world would not be so cruel as to separate me from you forever.” Lamli, too shocked at Lutan’s persistent optimism, and the fact that z’s life had been turned upside down in a

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<sup>27</sup> Bekarna? = no uncertainty? = Do you understand?

matter of minutes, could not reply. Ze just screamed as ze was placed in a transport.

The door slammed tightly in z's face as Lamli's mind returned to the present. It had been nearly a decade since ze had been given the opportunity to commute z's prison sentence in return for a life of service in the OWF. Ze had hidden the hatred in z's heart well from everyone, including Squad Leader—Hermis! Just thinking of the name caused a thick sheen of sweat to spread across z's body, and a pool of anger to rise up deep within z's chest. Ze clenched z's fist and looked out the hovercraft window as it slowly descended towards a pristine beach at the edge of what looked like a forest, densely packed with short, skinny trees and shrubs.

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A high pitched alarm started to go off as Insu was preparing the doses for the blood ritual. She swore under her breath—they were already here! She pulled out her myPhone and issued it a command.

"Beri, show me the visual feed near the motion detector that was triggered."

"Ha, muiha, one moment please," replied a somewhat garbled computerized voice. And, a few seconds later, a video on the myPhone screen showed a hovercraft landing on the shore right near the entrance of the Ishigaki Cove. Insu swore again. How had they known? Insu realized she had seriously miscalculated the intelligence gathering abilities of the OWF. Time for a Plan B. What that was, Insu had only a glimmer of an idea. She sucked her teeth and clenched her jaw, the way someone does when they realize they have to act, regardless of how anxiety-provoking the situation is.

She tapped a few command buttons on the myPhone and then spoke into it, her voice unable to mask the urgency she felt in her body.

"Cantai, where are you right now?" It was only a few seconds, but because of the level of tension in the situation, to Insu it felt like whole minutes passed before Cantai's high-pitched voice came through the speaker.

"Muima, I'm here on Yonaguni. We have secured the area—" She didn't let him finish his sentence.

"I need you to get back here *right now*. Leave Ohelti with the women underground and come to the western Ishigaki beach entrance, then grab Lutan. I've decided to trust your judgement in believing that he has not betrayed us – I don't have another choice right now. With your boat unencumbered, you should be back here in about half an hour, right?"

“Nadar, muima. I’m on my way.” The line disconnected, and Insu switched back to the video feed. The OWF soldiers didn’t look like she expected...they were dressed in what appeared to be civilian’s clothes. How strange. They also weren’t carrying guns, just what seemed to be lasershivs or sonic knives strapped to their upper legs. Though lasershivs were lethal weapons, to be sure, they were not as lethal as guns. The blades of the knives had to make contact with the skin in order to be effective—in other words, none of them were carrying serious Deathmaking weapons. She thought for another moment as to whether she should finish preparing the doses, but decided against it.

Insu sighed and gathered herself together, pulling the hood of her cloak over her head. Then, without any further delay, she left the chamber and walked through the dim hallways of The Cove towards where the soldiers had landed. She had to stall the intruders until Cantai and Lutan arrived. Cantai spoke more languages than English and Xamagen, and Lutan had some martial arts training. They could help her negotiate better should the need arise. She didn’t want to have to deal with the OWF totally on her own, and she couldn’t ask for the help of any of the men here at Ishigaki yet since she didn’t know who the spy was.

As she placed her palm on the panel to unlock the front gate, she prayed these soldiers would decide against attacking her since she was alone. She shut her eyes tight as the blinding sunshine streamed through the trees and into the slowly opening door. “Time to meet my maker, neh?” She whispered to herself, as she opened her eyes and walked into the light.

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Jamuklé, Wilson, and Hanu were lugging the heavy canvas supply bags out of the hovercraft. Yukiko stood observing the ocean from the beach, while Xiem, Günter, and Risam were switching back and forth between looking at their myPhones and the dense forest that lay before them.

“I’m trying to get a survey map of the island so that when we enter the forest, we don’t get lost.” Xiem explained to no one in particular. Günter glanced over at Xiem, and said “Yah, that’s a good idea. Let me know if you need any help with that.” Xiem looked up at Günter slightly shocked—why was he being nice to him? He turned back to his phone, heat slightly rising in his face, and it wasn’t from the sun bearing down on them.

“Argh—guys can we please go into the forest soon? I’m not wearing any sunscreen.” Risam whined like a child who’s been making a request for a while but hasn’t gotten his way yet.



“Just go sit under a tree or something.” Jamuklé had finished helping the others get the stuff out of the craft, and walked up just in time to hear Risam complaining.

“Fine,” he said with a huff, then stomped over to the nearest set of trees that would provide shade. “I wish I had some Dope right now, then I could just take a break right here without worrying about anything...” he muttered to himself. But Günter heard him.

“What did you just say, daho? You know the rules: no substance use on missions, ever.”

“I know, I know.” Risam said, without turning around to face Günter and reply. Günter snorted in frustration – was he really the only professional one here?

The rest of them gathered around the tree where Risam now sat, dozing off. Then Yukiko spoke up, “My mother told me about this place once...a beautiful chain of islands to the far south of what had been her family’s homeland for generations, before The Rift. I never thought I’d be here under these circumstances.”

Hanu sucked his teeth derisively at his girlfriend. She could be overly sentimental sometimes.

“Yuki-aela, what circumstances did you think you’d be here under?” He asked her somewhat jokingly. Yukiko took him seriously.

“Well, I honestly thought I’d be here on a vacation you know? Not to...kill people.”

“So, are you saying you’d rather not kill anyone who lives here?” A voice that was not familiar to any of the gathered, spoke from somewhere behind where they sat. They all, except for Risam who was now fast asleep, jumped up in alarm, hands grabbing the hilt of the knives at their sides.

Before them stood a woman of slightly more than average height, wearing a linen robe of turquoise with purple splotches dyed all over in a fractal pattern. Her skin was the color of moist ground, just tilled, her almond shaped eyes a dark hazel. Günter was about to speak up first, but Xiem beat him to it.

“Who are you? Identify yourself immediately.” Xiem said in his most forceful voice as possible, but it came out slightly cracking at the end. Günter then repeated the message in Xamagen, just in case this woman didn’t fully understand English. Whoever she was, she was intelligent enough to know the power of surprise.

The figure did not reply, but instead chose to take some more steps forward, inciting the others to move backwards away from the edge of the forest and into the sunlight. Then, removing her hood, she began to speak.

“That’s better, now we can all see each other clearly, ya?” Her voice was bright, crystal clear. Unafraid.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I demand that you identify yourself!” Xiem now used something more like a yell, rousing Risam from his slumber. He tumbled away from the tree and jumped up to face the woman as well, deeply perplexed.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Risam cried.

“Be quiet, both of you! Let this woman speak her mind.” Yukiko was getting annoyed at how the men were handling the situation. Insu continued:

“Give me one good reason why I should reveal myself to you.”

Günter decided this woman was playing hard to get, so he brandished his sonic knife menacingly.

“Because we represent the highest authority in all the world, the Legacy Division of the One World Government—the comptroller of the future of the planet!” Günter felt the power of the position seep into his words. The woman burst into a fit of laughter, tears of what looked like joy—or was it madness?—streaming down her face. They group looked at her, then back at each other. What in the world was she talking about?

“Neh, cut that out will ya? You’re making us nervous.” Wilson spoke for all of them. The woman recovered, and stood up straight again.

“You’re going to have to give me a better reason to tell you anything. For I answer to higher powers than the one you have just mentioned.” Insu felt good—she was stalling them well. The others should be here any minute to help her be even more convincing. But at this point she felt she might not even need them.

“And what higher power would that be?” Günter’s patience was running out.

“I will show you. Follow me.” And with that, she walked around them and towards the beach. The group looked at each other. Were they really going to let her toy with them?

“I think we should hear her out.” Yukiko said. “It doesn’t matter anyway, right? We vastly outnumber her.” This was a reasonable assertion. Lamli agreed with Yukiko, ze voiced z’s mind as well.

“Yeah guys, there’s no good reason not to listen.”

“Shut your mouth Lamli, since when did you ever have good ideas?” Günter took his stress level, which had risen to its peak, out on Lamli. Ze did not deign to reply to him, choosing instead to follow the mysterious robed woman down to the shore, where she had entered the water up to her ankles. She knelt down and took some water into her hands, then gently doused her face with it. After doing so, she turned around and began to speak in a way that somehow reminded them all of Squad Leader.

“You asked me what powers I answer to? Well look here.” She gestured behind them. “I listen to the Earth Mother, see how her many arms rise up and blossom from the ground, innumerable. Hear how the branches rustle with joy as Air Mother rushes through them!” As if on cue, a light breeze wafted through the trees, creating a loud rustle. The group gazed at her with blank stares, unimpressed.

Insu went on, “Now look here.” She knelt down to dip her hands into the water again and cupped some of it into her palms, and rose again. “See Water Mother, you cannot contain her, no matter how hard you try. She is in you, in all of us, nourishing us. Notice how she meets to meld with Earth Mother at the shore.” She picked up some of the damp sand at the edge of the beach, and let it fall through her hands the same way as with the ocean water.

“When Mothers Earth and Water meet, they form an unstoppable force. If they wanted, they could swallow you up, bury you alive without another word.” The group started to get even more nervous. They had never heard of these things personified in this way before. But, this woman was speaking as if these things – the Earth, the Sea, and the Air—were alive.

“Now finally, look up!” She raised her hands high, and they followed her hands to where she was looking.

“Gaze in awe at Sky Mother! Through her shine the Great Lights – the Sun, Moon, and Stars. Sky Mother is the gateway to all that is visible and invisible. She could blanket the Earth in darkness, and you’d have no say in it one way or another.” She looked back at them with a satisfied smile.

“Now, tell me, is the power you answer to more awesome than these?”

The group looked at her in stunned silence. Indeed, the power of the government seemed inadequate to handle the forces the woman had described.

“These mothers...what do you call them? Is there some title you give them?” Xiem’s curiosity allowed him to speak over his confusion. Something seemed familiar about this person, but it wasn’t exactly Squad Leader as he had just thought. A moment of inspiration flashed through his mind—this person was more like the man from the plugpull a few days ago! The woman smiled.

“I’m so glad you asked. These mothers, they are Gods, Goddesses, Great Spirits or Powers. Whichever you prefer.”

“Whichever I...prefer?” Risam didn’t understand, echoing the confusion of the others.

“Yes. Some call this ‘Spirituality.’ Others might call it ‘Religion.’ You are free to choose your notion of these Great Powers. Someday, you might even have your own way of seeing all of this too. I see them as mothers, but you might see them as fathers, or as some here do, as all combined into one single God. You might not even think of them as gods...maybe you envision them as ‘spirits’.”

“Stop it! Xiem, don’t listen to her. Remember what Squad Leader said? She’s trying to fill us with lies to confuse us.” Günter pressed a button on his sonic knife, beginning the progressive motion of the blade.

“Now, answer our questions or I’ll bleed you. You are under arrest for the attempted dissemination of Forbidden Documents, a violation of the New Age Creed of 2035.” Insu scoffed when he said that last part.

“New Age Creed, neh? That document is a sham, I will never honor it. And besides, we have done nothing of the sort.” She stood rigid, resolute, small waves lapping at her ankles as if to encourage her.

“Do what you will, I am unafraid. The Great Mothers surround me—how can I fear?”

Lamli, recognizing that this was about to turn into an unnecessarily ugly situation, and also the fact that something in the woman’s words reminded ze of those Lutan had said to muima...handsome, sweet Lutan.

“Fuck Squad Leader, Günter! Let’s just arrest her, there’s no need to spill her bl—”

“You *dare* defy the mission controls Lamli?” Günter screamed as he turned his active sonic knife on her.

“That is insubordination bordering on High Treason. Surrender your knife, now. You may no longer stand on equal footing with us.” Lamli sidestepped to position z’self in front of the woman. Ze unsheathed z’s weapon, a lasersliv.

“No, I will not stand idly by when someone who has not drawn a weapon on me is cut down like a beast.” Ze paused, considering z’s next move. Z’s lust for revenge, and z’s annoyance at Günter’s continued mistreatment was affecting z’s judgement.

“But I’d do that to *you* though Günter, you vile, *filthy* rabid cur!” And with that, Lamli lunged forward, z’s knife clashing with Günter’s, sparks flying from the contact.

The others looked on in alarm. The high-pressure situation was quickly spinning out of control. Xiem looked at the woman, as if she could help in some way, but then, seeing he had no choice but to try to diffuse the negativity, spoke his mind:

“Both of you, cut that out right now! Günter, you too are on the verge of violating the mission controls.” Günter looked over at Xiem without relinquishing the force he was applying to Lamli’s knife.

“What do you mean, Xiem-daho?”

Xiem replied, exasperated.

“Technically you are preventing the streamlined arrest of a fugitive!” That seemed to get Günter’s attention, he looked at Lamli, raising his eyebrows.

“I’ll back up on the count of three, okay Lamli?” Lamli nodded wordlessly. Günter counted to three then quickstepped backwards, both he and Lamli still brandishing their knives forward.

“Now, you two, disarm your weapons!” The knife-bearers turned to Yukiko, shocked that she had raised her voice at them. After another few seconds, they both complied.

Yukiko then turned towards the woman in the water.

“So now will you please surrender to us? We mean you no further harm presently.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“Why not? I have nothing to lose I suppose. I’ve said what I can.” She held her arms out for them to bind.

“My name is Insu, by the way.” That’s a pretty name, thought Jamuklé as she walked up with some sommelcord to wrap around Insu’s wrists. She was careful to bind the cord just enough to immobilize her, but not tight enough to cause pain.

“Stop right there! Don’t you dare harm her!” The group turned around to see a slender-statured man, with another more solidly built one by his side, hoods shadowing their faces. They both were dressed in similar prismatic robes as the woman, and they each held laserships, armed and at the ready.

“You’re to drop your weapons right now and let that woman come over to us.” The man with the larger stature was similarly unafraid.

“Oh? And what could the two of you do against all of us?” Günter asked as he sauntered over to face the men at a distance.

“Stop it Günter! This situation is now totally out of control!” Xiem was slowly realizing that it might have been better if they all had had more extensive combat training before this moment. It seemed that at the very least it would have allowed them all to learn how to keep their cool under stress. But Günter, who could not be convinced to stand down, was now rearming his sonic knife.

The two men in robes looked at each other, then the taller one said, “Let me handle this, Cantai.” The one who was apparently named Cantai nodded and stepped back, leaving the other to walk forward to meet Günter, slowly taking his hood off. Lamli, who had turned around to secure the woman’s binding, now looked back to the situation and almost dropped z’s weapon.

There, in front of ze, was none other than Lutan! Lutan, now seeing Lamli there out of the corner of his eye, but also realizing he could not take his attention away from the man threatening him, now said, without turning to face ze,

“Shabai xoz<sup>28</sup>a, aela.” At the sound of hearing “aela,” Lamli’s face was wracked with a combination of pain and happiness, the type we would only feel seeing a loved one we have thought was killed in an unspeakable manner beyond imagination.

But there was no time for a full-fledged reunion because Günter quickly took control of the moment, stepping forward and assuming a combat stance.

“Lamli, you know this Rogue neh?” Lamli said nothing, realizing the depth of the mistake Lutan had made. He should never have let Günter know he knew ze. Without further warning, Günter lunged at Lutan, trying to knock him off his feet. But what Günter could not have known was that ever since he had been released having served out his time, instead of getting to leave prison early like Lamli, Lutan had chosen to never let the embarrassment and regret of being unable to protect the ones he loved ever happen again. So it was that Lutan pressed back with considerable force that destabilized Günter, who, not having the insight to take his opponent more seriously, misjudged the pushback. Lutan unquestioningly took this opportunity to stab Günter swiftly in the neck, slicing through his flesh and opening up his jugular.

The group gasped in total surprise. It was clear that they weren’t exactly sure how else to react. On the one hand they wanted to rise up and fight for their mortally wounded teammate, but on the other hand Günter had neglected

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<sup>28</sup> Formal greeting in Xamagen for those who haven’t seen each other in a long time.

to instill the necessary amount of compassion in any of them to warrant such retaliation.

Günter fell to his knees, dark red blood spurting out of his neck like a geyser that has been released after having built up pressure for centuries. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as the life left his body. He fell over to the side now, the liquid leaking from his neck drenching the sand. Who could have known that it would first be the blood of a soldier soaking the shore, and not that of a Rogue?

“Let me go to him!” Xiem cried. The man who had killed Günter stepped back.

Xiem gingerly walked over to Günter. He felt the pain of losing someone that we realize we wanted to know better. There was obviously no reason to check for a pulse. He knelt and closed Günter’s eyelids and took the opportunity to give Günter his Final Rite in full, Yukiko coming to his side to echo him in English. It’s not like they were on some time limit, now...

*Jurunrengi omenki jewekenso gabarjurun.* “Those who came before us gave us this world.”

*Omengi dazqor hwagodo tuskarjurunya?* “But what good have we, the living, ever done?”

*Xere omengi bekar, nadarbata iumustu.* “Since we are uncertain, we must say what is certain.”

*Xe yize kikordekarna alägi sarana, sol iudekarbato omengi, yivomuigonraitanso shadarmustu.*

“Though there are no gods able to hear, We, the only ones able to speak, must declare your last rite.”

*Yigi omenki jazorjurun etudunso aynewasarnasarundor.* “May we never forget the lessons you taught us.”

*Omengi jerenze omenso tayarjarana ja shadarnadar.* “We assert this person has not transgressed us.”

Lamli walked up to the lifeless body. Normally ze would have spit on him, which was customary when one wanted to insult the deceased, but ze didn’t have the stomach for it. What point would there be? It’s not like he would notice. Ze then turned to walk towards Lutan with open arms. They embraced—Humans that never thought they would ever feel each other’s body again. The slenderer man that had arrived with Lutan looked on with what seemed to be a twinge of jealousy, but no one could be sure.

Insu walked to the center of the two groups and took control of the situation, emerging as the clear leader among all of them.

“I apologize from the bottom of my heart that such a thing has happened. Let us go inside and talk amongst ourselves as equals, to ensure such a tragedy does not repeat itself.”

The junren looked on at Lamli’s embracing the Rogue, stared blankly at Insu, then each other. The right decision wasn’t obvious, but the lack of choice was.

“Ha, lead the way, Insu.” Xiem spoke for the group, as was clearly becoming his habit.

“Nadar. Follow me then, please.” She turned, hands still bound, and led them, now friends among enemies, into the forest towards The Cove.







## Part Three: Xanar<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “To exist.”



When the time came for them to settle their differences—those who believed in powers greater than Humanity and those who believed in Humanity itself—when the moment arrived for them to finally come to terms with the belief that the world could not continue with both types of people in it, they did not use their words to engage.

In fact, similar to how, many years before The Rift, individual citizens decided to take out their anger and hatred on those who had different *faith* than they, say, pogroms by Christians on Jews, or elsewhere, as it was with retaliation against Christian intrusion in Asia, or Muslim interference in Europe – to be honest the examples are too numerous – so it was with the Secular against the Non.

There was no bomb-dropping as you would have imagined—no. It turns out, when a conflict becomes so personal as to involve the lives of individual citizens, instead of combat between national or governmental entities, small-scale tactics are employed on a mass scale. So it was that armed militias spread, first across the United States and then to Europe. Needless to say, when the former China joined in, victory of the Secular was assured.

No stone was left unturned. For the first time in history, there was a conflict wherein absolutely everyone must emerge as equals, and it was for this very reason that all forms of religious segregation had to disappear – Organized Religion being the most powerful segregator, beyond race, sexuality, drug users and abusers, age, economic status – even more powerful than national borders – all other divisions were found to be diminished and insignificant in the face of a common aggressor.

“Be you any believer in a God, be you any believer in a Spirit, be you not a believer in Humanity, you must burn and die—burn until even your ashes are less than memory. Your blood will serve as an example to anyone who would want otherwise,” said the chairman of the First One World Plenum, Emperor Zuiming Hermis Pitar.

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For the life of me, I was never sure of the Legalization of Substances and Fetishes Act. I do understand the rationale: it followed that after the tenets enshrined in the One World Constitution, the one in question being, “The Government will strive to support a rational and responsible citizenry, refusing to treat them as unintelligent animals like governments of the past,” all sorts of actions would now have to become legal. If deaths arose from such actions, then those individuals were not destined to survive in the first place. You must

understand, it isn't that we have no care for the value of Human life in One World—the opposite is true. If it truly isn't the place of the government to protect us from ourselves, then the Legalization of Substances and Fetishes Act is logical.

But, then there was the first time I found Risam high on the Dope. It was the year after our graduation from the One World Field Academy Flagstand One, and he had gone to North Central City<sup>30</sup> to support the building of new infrastructure for a local university. He and I had, throughout our time at the Field Academy, engaged in extensive substance use. But the Truth is that everyone did, within reasonable limits. These boundaries are ultimately in our own hands as individuals; we realized that as long as the use did not adversely affect our livelihood or potential to succeed, using was perfectly permissible.

In any case, I went to go visit Risam because he had sent me a message requesting that I come and see what his new life was like. He had a new job, a new home...some semblance of independence. I remember ascending the stairs to his apartment after he buzzed me up, and I found him sniffing a line of HQ Dope.<sup>31</sup> He promptly nodded off and was silent for a time. I sat there and watched my friend to see if he would remain breathing – I did so for about four hours. In the meantime, I took care of some clerical work for my new dijun position at Flagstand One Central.

In the middle of the fifth hour, Risam opened his eyes and asked me what had happened, and it was in that moment that I realized that Risam himself was no longer managing his substance use—well, actually, it was much worse than this. The Dope had reformatted his judgment to be more in favor of perpetual use of the substance, instead of perpetual focus on his life. It had caused a shift in his tendencies. Once this transition takes place in the mind of the substance user, it becomes extremely difficult to change the behavior. To be most honest: it is almost impossible unless they engage the plasticity of their brains. They are now within the True Danger.

I asked Risam how long it had been since he had gone to work, and he did not reply, instead choosing to light a cigarette (nicotine and smoke inhalation augment the high of the Dope) and open his window to let in some fresh air. He then went back to his bed and rearranged his pillows so he could lie back and slowly nod off again. I was unsure as to what I should do. The culture in which I had been raised dictated that we, as Humans, are not to

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<sup>30</sup> Formerly called “Chicago.” By the time of the renaming of North Central City, most people called it “Chiraq.”

<sup>31</sup> This is the highest quality Dope you can find.

impinge upon the rights and actions of other individuals, save for those that would end another's life with impunity. In the case of the ending of a life, some extra consideration must be taken. For the end of a life signals the termination of what ultimately constitutes an individual's wants, desires, and the infinite possibilities of their Existence.

And so it was that I made the conscious decision to try to remind Risam of the potential of his Existence, for it seemed that he had forgotten. I – rather selfishly I suppose – wanted to truly know if my friend had totally shifted his tendency to dying from the Dope, or was it the really the Truth that his aspirations had been lost in a cloud of destructive intentions. Either way, I would of course have no choice but to let him carry out his wishes.

On the centralized myPhone Forum, I had heard of a new “elite training program,” that would apparently allow those dijun who successfully completed it to speed up their promotion process. But, one was required to enter into the program in pairs of two, similarly to how all field units from dijun to xijun are partnerships. I surmised that Risam had perhaps been caught up in the monotony of whatever work he had been tasked with and now needed the stimulation and the tribulation of something more intense. Following a brief discussion after he had sobered up the following morning—there was no Dope left in the house and he also was at this point out of money—he agreed to file the transfer application with me. It was easy for him to uproot himself—for he had planted no roots in that city, save for his local Dope salesperson.

“Neh, Xiem, the Dope is easy to get in Flagstand One, right?” He had asked me as we walked away from his apartment with his belongings all neatly fitting into a large black duffel he had slung across his chest, the bag accentuating the fact that he had taken in more Dope than food in recent weeks.

“It’s easy to get everywhere, aela.” He tsked at me.

“Don’t call me that Xi, that’s what lovers call each other don’cha know?” I could only grin.

“Ris, the root meaning of the word is “dear one,” which you are to me indeed.” He didn’t seem convinced. I tried further:

“Since when were words totally fixed to their common usage? If that were true, we would never have new ways of speaking!”

He just grunted at me and had no retort, which I took as his understanding that I was totally correct. But it was also true that I did not normally call him “aela,” I only did so now because I had had a revelation, as I watched him nod off and seemingly stop breathing, that there were no other

individuals in my life that were as dear to me as Risam, my life not having led me to create other relationships with people that I might consider as such. The same was true for Risam—we were friend and family, all in one.

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Squad Leader sat with a child on his lap, a young boy. He loved getting children between the age of thirteen and sixteen in particular because, when he would experiment on them, they would have little to no idea as to what was happening to their bodies, and such a thing was very delightful to observe. These were of course children sourced from orphanages in disparate locations—Hermis wouldn't be stupid enough to acquire them all from the same place. Today, though, was a very special day, because he had four children to work with (two boys, two girls), as opposed to the single one that he would normally be able to take on at a time.

And so it was that Hermis brought the children down into the Activation Chamber, one at a time, and impaled them onto the X-shaped slabs: a spike in each hand and each foot. You can be sure they did scream as he did so, they had no understanding that Father Hermis would ever commit to such an action. But this is how it is with children—and many adults for that matter—thought Hermis to himself. They were innocent until you proved them wrong. How wonderful! How incredible it is that the Human does not instinctively assume the potential for cruelty that other Humans are capable of. Somewhere along the way in their evolution, Humanity's advanced cognitive abilities also created a weakness. Hermis loved taking advantage of this Truth.

As the pain subsided in the limbs of the children, being overtaken by the exhaustion of having to hold themselves up on the slabs, Hermis methodically injected each of them with a combination of HQ Sweet and Dope. He saw this as fulfilling his own curiosity as to the reaction he would be able to observe in each of them, and also in some way as an act of mercy to mitigate the process inherent in the Activation Chamber, a structure built and improved upon over many centuries by his family. He had made the most recent renovations, adding more slabs and reinforcing the existing ones. They started with just one slab in the ritual, thousands of years ago. This also was of course not the only Chamber.

The children were overwhelmed by the combination of pain and euphoria such that they could scarcely speak – indeed only moans and grunts could be heard, it had become impossible for them to formulate words. Hermis silently smiled at this and said nothing to assuage the fears of the children which were steadily growing again by the second. He promptly disrobed – it turned



him on to no end to expose himself to these kids who were under such mental duress. He then brought out the Great Spear, bequeathed to him by his father, and, timing his actions with what he considered to be the peak serum level of the substances in their bodies, stabbed each one of them in the side, so as to let the blood flow freely down to the crevices engrained in the floor of the Activation Chamber. And the blood did run into the basin at the center of the floor. Hermis watched, silently stroking himself in reverence of the gift the children were involuntarily giving him. He waited until the basin was full, and then proceeded to walk around to each of the children and check if they were still alive. They were not.

He then walked back to center and pulled the basin up out of the floor and raised it high above his head and spoke in a language long thought dead, “Arākni, Alārha ō, mene gödert xisen sige’ged mbi burkhany xulsig xilb. Amain, amain, amain, amain!”<sup>32</sup> As he said each “amain,” he turned and raised the basin to each of the lifeless bodies, after which he proceeded to drink the liquid in slow but methodical gulps, gradually filling himself with the blood of the children that were no more.

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My mother used to say that the hardest thing to get used to was the “leveling” of personalities after The Rift. In the past, if you went to different places you would meet people with attitudes and habits clearly different from your own, even only a few miles from where you lived. Since the promulgation of the Neutralization of Cultures Act of 2034, all children were meant to be brought up in the One World Culture, speaking as a first language One World Speech. It didn’t matter the race or culture of the parents; all children would be like each other. Hence, the strangeness my mother felt – people in general did not fully appreciate how culture and environment contributed to, shaped, and influenced the development of individual personalities until it was well beyond too late.

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I had been thinking about revolutions and how they have largely been ill conceived. They are ill conceived within the sense that they mount through a reactionary response, instead of a well-crafted response. The difference between the two approaches is the difference between success and failure. It is the

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<sup>32</sup> “Observe me, oh Lord, that I might do God’s will as my ancestors have done in days of old. Amen, amen, amen, amen!”

difference between changing the world in its entirety, or not at all. If you want to convince people of a new belief system, you don't need to use physical strength or brute force. The Truth is that all you need is to be the most convincing.

Being the most convincing means demonstrating to people that your system is the most attractive out of all other systems. It means showing people your beliefs, not forcing them to see. Previous failures of revolutionary action seem to all stem from a single inconsistency: that they do not take into account the ability of others to learn from watching. For example, Adolf Hitler – an infamous Pre-Rift perpetrator of mass genocide – made the mistake of trying to force people to believe in his system. If he truly believed his system was best, he should have been self-delimiting and maximized its potential in areas where people already agreed with him. Instead, he encroached on the minds of people who hadn't yet been convinced through watching, and produced a fatal flaw.

I'd like to call this "lackluster" persuasion. If the persuasion is not complete from the ground up, then the persuasion will inevitably fail. If the persuasiveness of a revolution is not achieved at each stage of its advancement, then it will never be completed.

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Berzek could barely swallow, his mouth was so dry. He was currently flying somewhere over what had previously been called the "Pacific Ocean." He had borrowed a long-distance hovercraft and was en route to an area representing the most recently logged coordinates of Hermis' missions. Berzek had no idea what he was doing – why did he care at all about what Hermis was up to? An inquiry to the psychoanalytical program on his myPhone kept coming up with the most ridiculous conclusions: obsession with Hermis' grandeur, obsession with Hermis' body, obsession with Hermis' obsessions. The death of – never mind. What fucking bullshit. If anything, there was just nothing better to do. Berzek reached up and rubbed his head, the hair that had been cut in mourning was growing back visibly now. A lush computerized voice of indiscernible gender emanated from somewhere in the cabin.

"Berzek-muiha, we are approaching the desired destination. You asked me to wake you up. Are you awake?" Berzek did not reply to the computer immediately, even though he knew that if he did not reply, the system would give him a light shock to wake him up.

"I'm detecting from your vital-signs that you are awake, but you are not responding to me, is that the case?" The computer in this hovercraft was

obviously an upgrade from the ones he was used to – Berzek was kind of looking forward to getting zapped.

“Yes, I’m awake, thank you for asking.” Berzek’s anxiety was at such a peak that speaking the words was causing his dry throat to feel like it was cutting itself to shreds just making sounds.

“No problem, it is of course my pleasure muiha. It sounds like your throat is terribly parched. I would like to remind you that there is potable water available in th—” Berzek cut the computer off by pressing a mute button on the dashboard of the hovercraft.

He reengaged the manual controls and brought the craft down closer to the island chain that was his destination. As he passed by one of the little islets, a shiny object briefly caught his eye. Berzek turned the craft around to head back to see if it was anything. And it was indeed something – a military issue 10 seater hovercraft. Now what in the world was that doing here?

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Now we find ourselves in another circular room, this being the Gathering Chamber within the Ishigaki cove. Around the table sat the remaining members of the Squad, along with Insu, Cantai, Lutan, Gurana, Ohelti, and Merna. After it became clear that the Squad was too traumatized to massacre the entire Cove, Insu had directed those who had fled to Yonaguni to return to the main base.

You see, once Insu had showed the soldiers that there was in fact no printing operation, it was decided that there was no point in continuing the mission until they had heard more from her. While Jamuklé had submitted a request for clarification to Squad Leader through the Song app, there had been no response as of yet. So it fell to the Squad to gather as much information as possible about the situation before deciding the next steps.

It was strange to be sitting across the table from individuals perceived as Rogues. But it was also the case that Xiem and Risam had, due to their most recent plugpull, decided that it was interesting to hear what Religious Rogues had to say. In addition, it was now apparent that Lamli z’self had no true respect for orders from anyone in the OWF. Thus, the team would not engage in any Deathmaking at present, as the most aggressive of the Squad lay dead and buried beneath the beach of his defeat.

Introductions and initial explanations completed, the group had fallen to silence. Insu took this opportunity recap and reengage the conversation.

“So essentially, you were all sent here to disable an alleged printing operation of Forbidden Documents, and also to end the lives of anyone involved in that process. But now that you have learnt that there is no such process, you have hit a snag in your mission controls. Correct?”

Xiem nodded and, looking around to his companions to see if anyone would speak up, said, “Yes, it is as you say. We can’t very well continue our mission, even if only one aspect is inaccurate. We must wait for further orders. Until that time, you should explain what you have been doing here that might have aroused the ire of the OWG.”

While Insu realized such an explanation was warranted and reasonable, sitting in front of her was a group of people that had been taught from birth to deny and even vilify the teachings of Religion and Spirituality – what would her words sound like falling upon their ears? But there was no time to debate too long in her head, she would have to follow her instincts. She proceeded to describe the necessity for a place where Religious Refugees could flee.

“You must understand, within the grouping ‘Religious Refugees,’ there is included a subset of people who adhere to no particular religion, but believe in a Spirit or some other ethereal being. All such beliefs are also considered Rogue.”

Everyone assembled realized this to be true. Gurana was envious of Insu’s monopolizing the conversation, so she offered up some more information. “You also need to gain complete awareness of our intentions as believers in Religion or Spirituality; an awareness that your Government hides from you.”

The Squad members straightened their posture at this. Gurana continued.

“Though *you* may think so, we do not believe in these entities instead of believing in Human Potential – we believe in them because we understand the very nature of this Potential. Left unchecked, left unguided, Humans have the propensity to be cruel beyond belief. Religion and Spirituality help us to self-correct our destructive tendencies and remain closer to balanced behavior. Does this make sense?

No one in the group replied immediately. It appeared that something in their education would contradict what this Gurana was saying to them, but they weren’t exactly sure. Jamuklé, trying to work it out more concretely in her mind, started thinking out loud.

“Even if what you say is true, why can’t the boundaries you describe be relegated as a responsibility of government? Can’t a government instill or direct a culture wherein people are guided by balancing principles?”

At this line of questioning, The Cove members burst out laughing. Cantai used his cloak to wipe some merry tears from his eyes and said, “How ridiculous! How could an entity created and operated by Humans ever possibly incite non-destructive behavior, if the Humans that have constructed it do not themselves believe there are forces greater than Humans to show deference to?”

The soldiers looked at Cantai, perplexed. Insu tried to ameliorate their confusion by saying, “Think of it this way: if Humans only show deference to a government, it is only deference to themselves. But what about the forces that created Humans in the first place? Where is the respect for all the elements that came together in such way that permitted your existence? Do not be baffled any further: you are here by the grace, the *permission* of something greater than you. Humans did not create themselves.”

“Do you mean to say it is a mistake that those victorious from The Rift lumped together Organized Religion and Spirituality in one category?” Xiem followed the line of thinking, but he was deeply frightened of its implications.

“There are no mistakes—everything that has ever happened was meant to be so. But I could say that it would be a grave error if Spirituality were not integrated into Humanity somehow again, and soon. Who knows how much longer we can last as a species if our destructive potential is left unchecked?”

At this, Cantai and Gurana got up and returned with something that looked like a stew. But the Squad members were still too jostled to even think of eating anything offered by these Rogues, save for Risam who was looking forward to eating whatever, as long as it wasn’t OWF rations.

After they had eaten in silence for some time, Insu said, “What do you say we continue this conversation a little later on in the day, and I show you around The Cove?”

The Squad, unable to think of another way to proceed, simply nodded, rose from their seats, and followed Insu as she led everyone from the room out into the dimly lit hallway.

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Hanu and Yukiko were standing side by side, part ways down the beach from the southern entrance to The Cove. They were holding each other’s hands, gazing out onto the waters that were the same incredibly clear ones they had met each other by years ago. Hanu, from a flagstand in the West, a roamer, a traveler, a deserter. He had left the Academy of Flagstand Three to see the

world. At the time, he felt there would be no other way to guarantee he could see everything he could before he died unless he did desert. Fuck the consequences! He would eat his fill or die trying. It also didn't help that he had what was becoming a somewhat problematic relationship with alcoholic beverages. And then there was Yukiko, a fellow roamer, traveler, but felt that there was some futility in deserting what for many people would have been the only privilege to truly gain in life: a secure place in the OWF. Around the time when Hanu met her, she was so committed to saving resources that she would even eat out of the trash if it meant getting the last sliver of flesh off a melon that someone had wastefully discarded. Wherever the Forces would send her was where she would go, and she would be happy if it was only 10 miles in any direction from her home.

And so it was that only ten or twenty some-odd miles south of the town of Yukiko's birth, did she come across a dirty-looking man with a manelike beard. She was in the area to help assist with Cultural Neutralization programs of the Ryukyu inhabitants. She performed most of the education work in an elementary school in Fukuoka, where the Ryukyu citizens had been moved after The Rift. It was the children of this particular age that were so important to help educate, because they were the seeds of the future prosperity of the One World – a place that could only continue to exist with a unified culture.

But the man on the beach, looking so relaxed—or was he just completely out of it?—with three or four empty beer cans laying by his side. He seemed not to notice her as she crept closer. It was out of the ordinary to have vagrants on the beach, normally they would be moved along by local law enforcement, or even placed in jail – there was no real excuse for vagrancy you see...everyone should have some sort of job in the One World. They were guaranteed.

Yukiko shook herself out of her musings and grabbed a stick that had dropped from the low-lying trees during a recent storm. It was long enough that she could extend her right arm fully and the stick kept her about 4 to 5 feet away from the man. She proceeded to poke at him a few times in the shoulder. No response. Then she poked at what was becoming a somewhat prominent beer belly. A low grumble erupted from the man, but she couldn't tell if it was his voice or if he was just passing gas. After a few moments, the man's eyes started flickering, his mouth flexing, causing his mane-like beard to shimmer in the late afternoon sun beaming down upon them.

“Anta wa dare?”<sup>33</sup> Yukiko instinctively used Japanese instead of One World Speech: she had just come from teaching a class to children who had parents that only spoke Japanese. She quickly corrected herself.

“Yigi nasrenfenka?” Yukiko used the angered mood to demonstrate her aversion to the man. The body lying on the beach was now wide awake now but wasn’t saying anything. He was just looking up at Yukiko’s face, in a daze. Yukiko tried again.

“Who are you and what are you doing here? Identify yourself or I’ll call the authorities—”

“Belle.”

The sound of the man’s gravelly rough voice interrupted her.

“What did you say?” Yukiko was in no mood to be interrupted right now.

“Comme vous êtes belle.” The man replied more clearly now, yet he still remained motionless on the beach.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, speak English or Xamagen, please...” The man sat up.

“I prefer not to speak that disgusting language – it is the speech of beasts and horrible sadomasochistic people.”

Yukiko didn’t speak enough English to know exactly what sadomasochistic meant, but she knew that the man must be wrong – she wasn’t disgusting, she was helping to make the world better. Wait a minute...-

“You must be a Rogue!” She was about to move backwards but the man reached up grabbed her by the wrist.

“Yigi dhendorfenkah?”<sup>34</sup> She was about to burst into tears – her day was going along so peacefully before this.

“Yigi omojotonso xumendorgaiuna. Ogi ren eto yigi xulo.”<sup>35</sup> The man’s One World Speech was impeccable—this caused Yukiko to stop in her tracks. No one with such good grammar would just be a Rogue. It sounded like this man was formally educated. The stick she had used to poke the man lay silently in the sand nearby. They looked into each other’s eyes, and then they were back standing on the same beach, standing side by side now as lovers. Yukiko had pulled Hanu back into the fold of One World, but Hanu had pulled Yukiko into the depths of his ravenous love. Luckily for Hanu, Yukiko had enough to give.

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<sup>33</sup> Who are you?

<sup>34</sup> What are you doing?!

<sup>35</sup> Don’t make your thoughts so lofty (stop being pretentious). I am a Human, and so are you.

A glint of light zoomed across the sky – Yukiko yelped in surprise. It was an OWF-issued hovercraft! They both turned and ran as fast as they could back to the southern entrance of The Cove.

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Berzek watched as two figures on the beach, who had been facing the most crystal clear water he'd ever seen, ran to a shaded grove beyond which he could see no further. He instructed the hovercraft to land...

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Kazu, after cutting Sinar's body into pieces with a lazershiv and stuffing them into two trash bags, dragged them along, one bag in each hand, and threw them into the sea on the eastern side of the Ishigaki cove. He knew from Hermis that he only had a limited amount of time while the rest of the inhabitants were distracted. Apparently there would be an "attractive intruder" coming to the island very shortly. He didn't really trust Hermis' descriptions because Hermis was most likely even more twisted than Kazu – and that was saying a lot. Kazu wiped the sweat from his brow, his spiky black hair, which was usually well-kept, was now windswept and tangled. One might have said he was handsome if he weren't so incredibly vulgar. Vulgarly does a lot to a face – the more disrespectful one is to other Humans, the more gnarled and spiteful the face becomes.

He watched as the two trash bags that contained the body of someone he may have eventually loved one day were slowly taken out to sea. A scream from the southwest pulled Kazu from his musings – his time was up. He shot up from where was sitting and sprinted towards the forest.

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"Bismillahirrahmannirahim. Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."

Everyone sat in the Gathering Chamber, listening to Insu speak. Her hands were still bound, and the sommelcord was beginning to cause her wrists to chafe and bleed slightly. But she didn't care one bit.

"You see my friends: these blessings are all different faces of the same idea. There is no other way for us to rationalize or understand the differences between religions except by realizing that they have the same exact purpose.



However, because Humans are so wonderfully imperfect, so too did we pervert and obscure the Truth we sought to proclaim.”

The OWF soldiers were having trouble following her trail of thought – just like adolescents who, though they are becoming more aware of their bodies, lack the wherewithal necessary to self-actualize.

Ohelti continued for Insu.

“Yes my friends. The problem is that *custom* overtook *reverence*. Before The Rift, Humans, with their never-ending desire to live life the right way before Death’s inevitable embrace, sought the best methods to serve God. This resulted in ‘the murder of infidels or heathens.’ Instead of uniting everyone in awe of God, Humans sought to be the most awful, and this transgression has nearly cost everyone the Spirituality Core. The greatest gift God ever gave to the world is this Core. And here at The Cove, we have defended it and safeguarded it. We would give our life to protect it.”

Risam perked up at the thought of some shiny gem with some sort of incredible power.

“So where is this Core, can we see it?” At that, the members of The Cove burst out laughing. Cantai stepped in to clarify.

“No, you fool. The Core is inside all of us – you need only tap into it. You don’t even need to be taught how to do this – the problem is that you have been raised from birth being taught how *not* to do this – you’ve learned how to avoid the Core that breathes life into the world through you and around you.”

Those assembled in the Chamber had no time to think further, because as soon as Cantai finished his explanation, the door burst open to show Merna, her suntanned face bleeding and tearful. She had tripped and fallen in her haste to reach the center of The Cove from the northern entrance. She ignored the OWF soldiers and spoke directly to Insu and Gurana. Lutan ran to her side, because it seemed as if she was just going to collapse with utter exhaustion.

“Everyone, have you seen Kazu?”

Xiem spoke first:

“Kazu? What’s a Kazu?”

Insu cursed in her head. With all the commotion she had totally forgot about the spy – Merna must have realized it was Kazu.

“Aiya! Merna, he must still be somewhere here—”

But before Insu could totally collect herself to take on this new problem, screams and yells were heard down the hallway through the now open door. It was Hanu and Yukiko returning from what was supposed to be a leisurely stroll along the waters by which they first met.

“Junren! Everyone! An OWF hovercraft is landing on the southern side of the island!” At that, everyone jolted up, now totally alert. The time for calm was absolutely over. Xiem rushed to cut off Insu’s sommelcord, there was no point in it now. He realized that whoever was landing on the beach at this moment wouldn’t care what any one of them said. The soldiers should have already completed their Deathmaking and be on their way back to one of the Flagstands to receive further orders, but instead they were all discussing Rogue ideas like they had known each other for ages.

.....

It looks like weak logic if I say there are male roles and female roles. A glaring aspect of these terms being logically weak is that a role implies a responsibility.

A male doesn’t need to do anything in particular to be a male, and a female doesn’t need to do anything in particular to be a female.

The real question is whether or not you are a biological positivist. A biological positivist might take the form of someone who believes that our sexual phenotypes imply a certain responsibility. But if this is the case, what is the reason for the phenotypical expression of “choice in action” we’ve been given? Why have we been given the illusion of “choice”? In other words, why are we not more like chickens or bugs that procreate mechanically when given the opportunity? In the absence of a lack of choice, a biological positivist viewpoint appears to not apply as fittingly to Humans as it does other life forms and the suggestion that Humans should mirror phenotypical roles like those of other animals therefore seems illogical.

.....

A wise man once said, “Greater love has no one than this: that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And it is in this vein that I have tried to conduct my life. All around me people would say, “No! Live for yourself!” and they would say, “No! Live for your family!” and they would say, “No! Live for your country!”

But what Self do I have with no friends to help me feel I am real? And but for my friends, what family do I have if such family is all dead or gone? And without my friends, in what country do I really live? Without True Friendship, the kind where you know you would die for one another, assuredly one’s life is

barren like an ever-parched desert, except one is starved steadily of oxygen, as if held forcedly below frigid water.

.....

Wilson, his lanky body doing nothing to block out the sunlight that poured into the dim hallway as he held the door open for all assembled. He didn't brush his dark flowing hair out of his face as he said "Hurry everyone, I'll take up the rear!" As Jamuklé ran by him, she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

The whole group set out at a jog that turned into a breakneck run. The trees, ones that looked like they had grown so tall so effortlessly, long branches falling towards the ground, almost reaching the vines and shrubs that cascaded along the forest floor, swayed gently in the semi-tropical breeze. Insu and Ohelti had prudently decided not to leave through The Cove entrance that was nearest to where they believed the OWF craft had landed. Instead, they decided to circle around from the opposite end, using the forest for cover.

They arrived at the edge of the trees near the beach. As predicted, there was a craft, and outside it stood what seemed to be a high ranked OWF soldier. He was looking around as if searching for something that would in any other case be invisible. In his hands was some sort of tracking device, but no one in the party had ever seen such a device before. The man was solidly built, and in some other circumstance many of those assembled would have asked him on a date. But this was not the time for such nonsense.

Insu, the Soul of a Leader pulsating deep within her, stepped out of the forest first.

"Asparu junren! Nagenso iudekarya?"<sup>36</sup>

Berzek turned towards her and instinctively drew his lazershiv. As he had been trained, he pointed the tracking ray directly at the breast of his target. But when he saw it was a woman, he let his guard down. It wasn't that he was attracted to her, it was mostly that he wasn't worried about being hurt in any way by a woman in a beautiful dress.

"I speak whatever feels most natural in the moment." Berzek wanted to take on a tough guy stance. "I'm not here to cause any trouble, not immediately at least. I'd like to know what in the One World is going on here."

Berzek glanced behind Insu and saw the group of soldiers.

"I see you've met some others from the OWF. Is there any reason why you are representing them and not the other way around?"

---

<sup>36</sup> Greetings, soldier! What language can you speak?

Insu took a few precious seconds before responding, the breeze only somewhat rustling her garb. “The reason, Sir-...”

“You may call me Berzek.”

“The reason, Berzek, is that we’ve decided unanimously not to harm each other until we too understand what is going on. You see, these soldiers were sent here to massacre the Last of Our People. And in light of the fact that we are the Last, you can understand that we would try everything we could to preserve ourselves. We are essentially defenseless, so what other tactic would we have except for laying down our lives and surrendering to those in possession of weapons?”

Berzek considered this for a moment, but quickly came to the conclusion that what the woman was saying made sense. There are ultimately three significant options for those without defenses. First, one could try to steal the other’s weapon. Second, one could try to flee. Third, one could try to surrender. Each one of these options would be carried out in an effort to preserve one’s life.

Risam stepped forward to Insu’s side.

“Berzek-muijun, you must understand that this woman, Insu, is telling the truth. We were originally sent here by our Squad Leader to conduct a Deathmaking.”

Berzek folded up his tracking device and put it in his pocket, turning towards Risam.

“Why would you be sent here? Surely people on an isolated island have no real effect on anyth-...”

“There was supposed to be some sort of printing operation here of Forbidden Material. But no such operation has been found.”

Risam, ever impatient to get his point across in a demonstration of his intellect, did not even wait for Berzek to finish his sentence. By Squad Leader, they must be talking about Hermis, Berzek mused to himself. Hermis! That snake! Commissioning a Squad within the Army, hiding his true plans for the Squad from other ranking officers. Undoubtedly, something must be amiss.

Gurana, envious even now that Insu was getting attention from such an attractive individual, stepped forward to say her piece.

“You junren are causing nothing but trouble. We had been living a peaceful existence here until you all decided it was your ‘responsibility’ to invade our islands. What Peace does anyone have if they cannot feel safe on their own land?”

Berzek declined to answer this somewhat rhetorical question, and instead turned his attention towards the rest of the group that had now fully emerged from the forest. He pulled out the little tracking device he had held in his hand before. He made a brief pass among all the people to see if any of their biometrics were recognized. If they were anywhere in the OWF database, this little tracking device would display the information. They ideally would be the same as the profiles Hermis had shown him before.

Lamli, Jamuklé, Yukiko, Xiem, Risam, Hanu, and Wilson. Seven junren, no last name recorded. Only a first name and an age, no photograph confirmation. He hadn't noticed when Hermis first provided their profiles. Yet the biometrics were registered somewhere in the OWF database...one normally couldn't create a record without a full name and profile pic.

"You bunch. Tell me your names." He was talking about the non-junren.

Lutan, who had up until this moment been silent by Lamli's side, stepped forward.

"We are the Last that believe in some Spirit. I am Lutan." And he continued, gesturing to the others, "That's Ohelti, Gurana, Cantai, and Merna. You already know Insu."

Now that they were all acquainted to some extent, they stood there silently. For a moment, some of them glanced out into the sea, as if it could somehow come and graciously swallow all of them up just so that the situation would end.

A dark, low, gravelly voice shook them from the brief peace.

"Having fun in your little party, neh?"

Startled, everyone turned in the direction of the voice.

"Aiya! Kazu, you bastard! What do you have to do with any of this?"

Insu, who had almost never said a swear word in her entire life, had decided to use one now.

"Insu, you are truly a dumb bitch. How could you have been fooled by someone like me, so clearly a lowlife?" Kazu was grinning gleefully. Seeing so many people reacting to him in fear was turning him on. He ventured a guess:

"Perhaps it is because, as it has been said, 'give good tidings to those that say they believe,' and I was simply conducting myself in such a manner."

Insu looked to Berzek for help. Seeing this, Kazu spat and drew his lazershiv, making it obvious that he had released the safety. He aimed at Insu.

“Don’t even think about doing anything Berzek. What is happening here is beyond your comprehension. You should have stayed at home and shaved your head again for your lov-.”

“Keep him out of this!” Berzek screamed. How did this disgusting mangy dog know his name? And how did he know about Kaileb?

Kazu was unfazed, he had “predicted” such a reaction, though he had never met Berzek before.

In a voice that sent shivers down Xiem’s spine Kazu said, “Shut the fuck up you fucking goddamn daho. You disgust me. Drop your weapon and come over here or I’ll shoot the bitch dead before you can draw your shiv.”

Though Berzek had no feelings in the slightest for Insu, he had no desire for someone innocent to die. And now he could put a name to a face, and so of course the pain of her death would be that much worse. For it is unarguable that we feel not for the deaths of those whose faces we do not know the name, and we feel even less for those who are nameless and faceless. But truly we will feel some twang of pain when we know the name that goes with the face, and that from the face could have been spoken that name and more words, and could have yet still shown the breath of Creativity had they not passed irrevocably from the world.

In one motion, Berzek unsheathed his lazershiv and dropped it into the sand. He walked over to Kazu.

“Stop pointing that at her.” Berzek was ordering Kazu around, though he knew he had for the moment lost the upper hand.

“Gladly.” And Kazu turned the lazershiv at Berzek, circling around to be behind him. He grabbed him such that the blade of the shiv was now at Berzek’s neck.

“Now, all of you will wait and do what I say, or I will kill this daho dead on the spot.”

None of those assembled dared to move a muscle. Kazu reached around to the belt of Berzek’s pants.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Berzek’s whole face became flushed, and if there weren’t a primed shiv against his neck he would have jumped away in horror.

“Shut up. I’m hard and I need to get rid of this so I can concentrate.” Everyone’s eyes widened in horror. If there was ever someone who fully described Rogue behavior, it would be this man, Kazu. Or was he even still a person at this point?

Kazu didn't wait to thrust inside. Berzek screamed the most awful, bloodcurdling scream, his entire body clenching in agony and humiliation.

"Stop resisting, it'll only hurt more." Kazu could scarcely speak, he had never been so turned on. A whole group of people held at his very whim! And he could even get some sweet release. It was becoming easier to thrust since Berzek was now bleeding profusely, the blood was flowing freely now; Kazu wouldn't be able to hold on much longer....--

Xiem, who at the sight of blood was roused from his shock, realized that he might have a single moment to act. He knew the moment would be at the exact second that Kazu would orgasm. The reason for this is that there was no Human that wasn't momentarily incapacitated by that final event.

And so it was that Kazu, who did not take into account that fact that he would be momentarily incapacitated, was indeed thrown into a reverie as he came, groaning in pleasure, as Berzek simultaneously cried out to the Sky in despair. Xiem at this same instant issued own battle cry, and he sprinted forward, tackling both of them to the ground. The rest of the group, following his lead, ran to where they had fallen, separating them and restraining Kazu. Hanu and Lamli grabbed Kazu's arms, while Jamuklé and Wilson got the legs. Xiem straightened himself up to survey the scene, while Berzek lay motionless on the ground, eyes closed, silently weeping with his eyes wide open, enraged. For, besides murder, there is ultimately no other crime against Humanity as base as rape, as it is the violation of our very last barrier to the world, a barrier we normally let down only voluntarily – and even when it is voluntary it may yet be an arduous task.

Jamuklé grabbed what remained of her sommelcord and put her whole body weight onto the leg she had been holding so she could use her hands to bind Kazu's wrists with it. Hanu took similar actions to bind his legs. Hanu spat into Kazu's eye, causing Kazu to wince. But he said nothing, which everyone felt was somewhat strange because he had only just been running his mouth. Berzek still lay motionless, but Xiem, who could no longer bear to watch him weep, gingerly walked over to the sand-covered body on the beach, which was subtly shaking with silent sobs. Xiem grabbed the top part of his body, while Risam helped his friend with the other side. After righting Berzek, they helped brush and clean him the best they could and reorganized his clothing. At any other time, Risam might have made a shitty joke. What was the point of clothing to protect you if it could so easily be ripped away?

Insu, ever-prudent, broke everyone's shock: "Sembuxeren.<sup>37</sup> This isn't the time for being idle, it is obvious we are all still in terrible danger. There won't be any room for fixing actions of error."

Lamli, who hadn't had a chance to voice z's opinion for what felt like ages spoke up, z's normally soft-spoken neutral face contorted with worry, "You're absolutely right Insu – let's pick up this True Rogue and bring him back into The Cove for questioning. We're too exposed here on the beach."

But before anyone could make moves to pick Kazu up, a horrifying yelp sounded from behind them. All assembled were so consumed with securing Kazu that they'd forgotten to look towards the forest! Everyone jolted to turn backwards and look in the direction of the scream.

There, to everyone's shock and dismay, was Squad Leader who, in the midst of the commotion with Kazu, had somehow gotten a hold of Merna and put a sonic knife against her neck. A sonic knife was more dangerous than a lasershiv because one press of a button could decapitate the victim in less than three seconds.

Xiem, who, like all the other junren, felt betrayed and used in a way he had never felt before as a soldier, yelled with the kind of anger and frustration that we first feel as children, when our parents leave us to go about their business, the kind of rage which from that point extends into adulthood and represents itself so acutely when, for example, a lover leaves us without another word, or worse, they leave us with lies spewing from their mouths like killer bees emitting from a hive in self-defense.

"Hermis! Let her go!" Xiem no longer cared to call Hermis "Squad Leader" anymore.

Hermis just grinned his lovely grin and moved the knife to the part of Merna's body where her right arm met her shoulder. Without another word, he activated the sonic knife and sliced off the arm. It did indeed take around three seconds, and the move had the predicted effect of causing everyone to shout in protest simultaneously. Blood was spewing from Merna's wound.

Insu's pained cry resounded above all the others, "Stop! Let go of my sister!" Tears streamed from her eyes as how rain falls from a window pane held at an angle towards a hurricane-filled sky.

"Oh ho. Are you sure you want me to do that? If I give her over to you now she'll just bleed to death Insu-*muima*." When he said "*muima*," he did so in such a way as if to give no regard in the slightest to her rank among her people.

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<sup>37</sup> All of (you) people



Insu said nothing in response, she could scarcely get her brain to formulate any cogent plan. Risam looked at Lamli, and as if he could read z's mind he yelled at Squad Leader, "Just use your lazershiv to cauterize the wound, please Squad Leader...please..." He had thought the request would come out more forcefully, but Merna's low moans robbed him of confidence. Squad Leader, as if trying to demonstrate that he was in fact merciful, deftly grabbed his lazershiv and heated the blade with the lazer such that when he did in fact press it to Merna's wound it burned the flesh shut. Merna screamed in what would undoubtedly be the beginning of an undying agony.

"If you would all follow me in your craft, please..." Hermis's voice was calm and cool, and his actions were deliberate, unrushed, as he dragged Merna away from the scene and hauled her into a smaller, four-seater hovercraft that he had hidden in some brush nearby. It was as if he had been looking forward to this moment for a long time. Or maybe it hadn't been that long at all...

Xiem turned to the junren, "Do you think we still have access to the hovercraft controls?" The controls were still under automation by the OWF but it was possible that they still had override access. Xiem's voice was rushed, hurried. This was interesting...it wasn't like the person Squad Leader took into custody was an ally. She was a Rogue. What was a Rogue, then, in any case? Why did they even care about her at all?

The fastest way to the other side of the island was through The Cove. Xiem turned to Hermis and shouted, "Okay, okay! Just wait and don't hurt her more. We'll get the craft from the beach on the other side of the island. Just don't hurt her more, please..."

Squad Leader did something he was not usually wont to do, and grunted, responding "That's fine. I'll wait."

The junren and The Cove members, including Lutan, ran towards The Cove entrance so they could pass through the underground corridor. Lutan grabbed Lamli's hand and squeezed it tight. Wilson took this moment to do the same with his love, Jamuklé. Hanu did the same with Yukiko. Risam, who, while he was not "in love with Xiem," felt left out, so he grabbed Xiem's hand and pulled him along. Insu watched this scene with a twinge in her heart. Such displays were ones of love and mutual respect...what kind of person would thrust upon these lovely Humans such wasteful burdens?

They reached the other side of The Cove and burst out onto the beach into the beaming sunshine. Gurana was panting heavily, her age and body weight not exactly fit for the effort, but she wanted to be Insu's equal...she wanted it so very much. Sweat poured down her face such that Insu thought

she might collapse, so Insu encircled Gurana's shoulders with one of her arms to give her support.

"Ogi yize nakarjurunduvu ja omujurun!"<sup>38</sup> Insu said breathlessly.

Gurana, who in the past may have simply grunted just as Squad Leader did a few moments ago, instead said, "Yigi sar, ogi hanu."<sup>39</sup>

The light was blinding, bursting, gleaming, the fresh air streaming, unrelenting, pristine. At any other time these would have been moments to lay lazily on the sand and soak in the merciless sunshine. But instead, we find ourselves looking at a group of anxious Humans – all of whom had not before this point ever really known or met each other, and they certainly had never been friends. It never ceases to amaze: when we are faced with a collective overarching cause to rail against, our differences fall away like snow melting off the branches of a tree whose leaves are still dead from the past winter, but upon which we can see buds waiting to triumphantly burst forth.

They all crammed into the large OWF craft and it slowly rose above the low-lying tree tops. Not everyone could fit in a seat. Those who were comfortable sitting on someone else's lap did so. Squad Leader, who had been watching the sky for their launch, launched his own hovercraft and directed it to fly it towards the northeast...

.....

Oh god...oh god – how I loved him. At the time, I thought the best thing we could do was not think in terms of our bodies, but in terms of how much we loved each other at that moment. Or was it the case that in fact I was the only one actually in love, simply enraptured by an illusion? An enrapturing illusion resulting from the shadow of a pale lithe body in my mind, and when it would move in the shadows it would seem as if I could gracefully reach out and touch it, gently, just to feel if the heat would ebb from it and into my hands which were always so cold and in so much pain. And ultimately it may have been the case that no matter how much pleasure I could instill in him with my hands, it was in the end only that – pleasure.

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<sup>38</sup> I thought you were going to fall!

<sup>39</sup> You're here, (hence) I am lucky. Xamagen has comparative statements such as this, where the cause for a certain thing is indicated by two clauses in a series, where the first clause is the necessary factor for the second clause to be true. This is of course totally contextually based, and sometimes a series of clauses are not dependent or related to each other in this way, but are just conjunctive.

We spend our days accepting as axiomatic that of course there is Pleasure without Love. But what about Love without Pleasure? What does that look like? What does it look like when my heart beats so achingly and harmfully in my chest when I get a simple glance of such a transient existence, such unfalteringly temporary beauty? Is it actually the case that Love and Pleasure are not as unbounded as we once thought, and it is in fact the case that when we feel Pleasure there is actually Love there hidden in the darkness, and that when we feel Love, we are only steps away from feeling Pleasure we never thought we would ever find from the other?

These kinds of reveries, these kinds of notions...in the years before Zuiming we had no time for such things – we felt, we acted, we did. But after The Rift, and the First Plenum, there was more time for such thoughts, more time for listlessness.

.....

Sexuality is rooted in something that is now deemed fluid, maybe even to the point of having the quality of being “arbitrary.” If a person says they are attracted to the same gender, that aspect of sexuality is called “homosexuality.” However, in describing how a Human is attracted to a dog or some other animal, the behavior was called “zoophilia.” Why did they not call it “canisexual” for attraction to dogs or “equusexual” for attraction to horses? In an effort to not be hypocritical in this instance, we would eventually align the definitions – it looks like sexuality is based on attraction to certain definite, qualifiable attributes, but the presentation of these attributes is nearly or perhaps completely unlimited.

.....

When Jesus the so-called Christ was crucified, it was said that he was buried in a cave in Judea. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, Jesus the so-called Christ was crucified *in* a cave and he died *in* the same cave. This cave, constructed by the previous members of the Pitar family, was none other than an Activation Chamber. The ceremonies took on multiple forms, and at the beginning the execution of a single prominent social figure of the local populace was necessary, but the execution of Jesus the so-called Christ was handled poorly, as the Pitar family executioner living at the time did not properly understand the extent to which Jesus would be remembered as a messiah. The Activation had three primary purposes: 1) to punish the hubris of a Human that became too famous within a certain social context and 2) to create

bottlenecks of Human creativity and 3) to serve as a warning to those of the family that would ever stop performing the ritual. A ritual of control must be continued in perpetuity, lest control be lost to the people of the world themselves. And surely this would be impractical, Hermis thought to himself as he secured the final rods in place. Control by the People, instead of Control *of* the People, was worse than anarchy.

.....

What does it mean to be part of a squad? What does it mean to be part of a team? Is the point of such things to become friends? In what situations is it possible to “get along” with each other? Under what terms could we, such wretched beings, who in previous eras of our existence assuredly did want to steal, maim, and rape each other, ever possibly hope to get along?

The conclusion, which had escaped sociologists and other social theorists for the longest time, is ultimately that there is simply only one thing that unites us evenly, uniformly, and fairly. It is nothing else but the Common Goal. Without the Common Goal people inevitably fragment into factions, because the preservation of these factions is a subsidiary Common Goal.

.....

And in their last moments, their last days, they will all ask themselves, “how on Earth did I get addicted to drugs?”

When I was a child I never had any such inclination to do any such thing. But then, somewhere between being a Child and being an Adult, we become, well, not all of us, but many if not all of us, no wait actually, yes – all of us. We all become addicted to something.

And it was in those moments that I felt myself wonder whether or not I was still a child, and if I was even still growing. And if I turned my head to look up towards God, would I be able to see a God gazing down on me, beneficently, or would I see the teeth of the Devil with z’s fiery grin racing towards me as I struggled to get more high?

And it was in those moments that I seriously felt myself wonder whether or not I was still a Human, that I could somehow go to somebody, anybody, and beg that they save me, that they grant me some solace from the depths of their unchanging, unmoving hearts. That in their minds I might have a voice that speaks, and in their heads I might have a hope that would glisten through the crevasses of their souls so that I, too, might be considered Human again.

But these desires, these regrets, they continually fall on deaf ears such that I would never again see any light of day because I am inevitably pierced by multiple spears of hatred and loss. These are the spears that we believe graze most of us and leave us behind, but actually we are stabbed and maimed by them hour upon hour, day upon day, until the last grasping vestiges of anything we felt was our bubbly, Child-like selves slips out of us as we punish people in ways we never thought we would punish them in, torture them in fashions that, when we were merely three, four, or even five years old we never would have dreamed of fashioning. And when we lie on our deathbed or the ground upon which we will finally be gasping for any remaining air we will try, in vain, incredible desperate vanity, to claim that we deserve forgiveness.

.....

The Activation Chamber was supposed to be a modest affair, but it was in the time of Zuiming Hermis Pitar that its fashioning became much more ostentatious. Though there was a reveling in Death associated with the Chamber, there was an unspoken cultural agreement that, while the Deathmaking was unarguably ceremonial in nature, the room itself should remain bland. It was said that this was out of some form of respect for the Sacrifice that remained in the hearts of the Pitar family and associated progeny. But, by way of The Rift, or by way of the final hardening of the hearts of those who kill Saviors as a main goal of their family line, for some reason the Chamber that Squad Leader built in Ryukyu was the grandest of them all.

Fourteen x-shaped pillars of sculpted marble, each one etched with blood collection pathways lined with gold. In the middle of the center platform was of course the blood collection trough. In ancient times, it was necessary for the blood to be pumped upwards, by hand, into the libation bowl from the trough. But, in this case, Squad Leader had installed a pumping mechanism that would bring the blood up out of the trough into the libation bowl without him having to exert any sort of manual labor. It also allowed him to conduct the whole ceremony on his own without any need for his other family members. It would assuredly be troublesome if any one of them interfered...

A wash of what looked like mother of pearl adorned the walls of the domed Chamber. It had been extremely time consuming to build the Ryukyu Chamber – unlike in previous times, where the laborers were members of the family, or their slaves, Squad Leader had to keep this chamber absolutely secret, so logically he had to murder anyone who was involved in the construction.

Squad Leader turned from the entrance and looked towards all of these insects he had so delicately captured.

Lamli – oh, Lamli. How could he ever forget the menace he saw in z’s eyes when he destroyed z’s life. Lamli – full of lust. Of course the only thing ze had ever been good at was being seductive for the purpose of z’s carnal cravings. No wonder ze had gravitated towards a brothel as a child. It was the one place where ze could satisfy the depths of z’s neutral-gendered satisfaction.

And for that matter Jamuklé – not exactly the opposite but just as repressed. Scraggly transgendered Jamuklé, who had never gotten laid in her life – how chaste! How ripe for picking!

Squad Leader motioned for everyone to step forward out of the light, so that he could close the chamber door behind them. Merna was already impaled upon one of the pillars. Hermis would have to work quickly now, she was already beginning to die of exhaustion.

As the last remaining sunlight was blocked off by the door which shut with a resounding finality, the flare of hundreds of glowlights illuminated the Chamber. Against the mother of pearl walls, the glowlights might have been beautiful – indeed even now they were stunningly enchanting. But somehow the atmosphere forced the light to take on a sickly feeling. Insu could feel that Deathmaking had occurred here on more than one occasion.

Squad Leader turned to look at Yukiko. Yukiko – how levelheaded. It was almost assured that she had never had a drink in her life, unlike her gluttonous lover. How she could deal with a man like Hanu, Hermis could barely begin to guess.

He directed Xiem to go to the first pillar on the far left of the circular platform, as we imagine a conductor might as they begin to lead an orchestra. “You’ll wait there, won’t you Xiem? I’m sure you can just feel the suffering that I have inflicted upon Merna. And you won’t do anything about it except stand there – isn’t that right Xiem?”

Xiem silently obeyed. He refused to look at Squad Leader, and instead chose to look upon Merna’s struggling body. It looked like she had passed out but her unconscious body yet wanted air.

Wilson, out of a basic desire to maintain attention to detail in all matters, had remained silent for most of the journey, carefully recording in his mind all that had transpired. It was nevertheless clear that he understood the gravity of the situation, and therefore he walked up to the pillar next to Xiem.

“Why don’t we all just *gang up* on this motherfucker, huh!?” Risam shouted, exasperated. Kazu, who had been unceremoniously dragged along by a

sommelcord wrapped around his wrists, replied in a shockingly neutral tone, “Oy, kikorneh?<sup>40</sup> If you make so much as one move, I have no doubt that Squad Leader will eliminate that Merna in seconds flat. Unless, you don’t really care about her or some shit.”

Risam did not reply. He gritted his teeth and walked near to where Wilson now stood.

“Oh ho – you thought you’d be able to stand near you friend as you die? I don’t think so.” Squad Leader merely motioned for Risam to go to the opposite side of the platform. Risam acquiesced, but he spat on the ground as he walked around the trough in the middle of the platform, still with Kazu in tow like a little kid on a leash. As his spit flew from his mouth towards the ground, he expected Hermis to have some sort of reaction – but Squad Leader remained composed. He was, however, getting impatient. The ritual needed to begin – now.

“Berzek, Jamuklé, Yukiko, and Insu – you get in place next to Xiem and Wilson. Insu, if you like, you can meet your Death next to your sister.”

Insu reluctantly complied – she wanted no further harm to come to Merna. No one else had anything to say, but it would not be found that this was out of fear of Squad Leader. The silence was ultimately derived from the fact that they were worried that if they said anything too loudly, they would cause Merna to awaken, such that she would be enveloped again in what was likely indescribable pain.

Squad Leader’s melodious voice erupted again: “Hanu, Gurana, Ohelti, Cantai, and Lamli, you take your place next to Risam and Kazu.” The four of them complied with Squad Leader’s request, slowly walking around the platform, careful not to get too close to Hermis or Kazu. They were worried Hermis would fear they meant to harm him in the moment and he would then want to lash out and attack them. And they wanted to stay away from Kazu because, when he heard his name uttered by Squad Leader, he let out a cry of incontrovertible anguish, using words rarely heard any longer in this era.

“Hermis! You backstabbing FAGGOT –” As he said “faggot,” spit flurried out of his mouth and began to visibly moisten the ground beneath him. “How dare you use me like this – I did EVERYTHING you told me to. You could have picked someone else besides me for sacrifice. Why would you turn on someone that has done exactly as you asked?”

Squad Leader did not immediately reply, but chose instead to give a lighthearted giggle.

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<sup>40</sup> You’re listening, right?

“Kazu, you’ve explained it for yourself – it is precisely because you have done everything I have asked that you will also meet your Death here. Your Greed was your undoubted undoing.”

Kazu started towards Hermis, but he was held fast in place by Risam’s sommelcord.

“Now then, place your backs on the pillars, please.”

Most of those gathered did so immediately as Squad Leader asked – at this point, they weren’t sure about what they could possibly do otherwise. But, there was still Xiem, who, when he realized that giving up to Defeat was an appropriate course of action only insofar as there were no other options arguably available, refused to put his back onto the pillar. And it would seem that no one had seen.

Hermis, who had somewhat callously assumed that since the majority of people had given into his demand, also decided it was logical that the rest of them would follow suit. He grabbed his myPhone and activated the Pillars from an app on his home screen.

And it was in that moment that Entrapment Rods erupted from the pillars and stabbed those of them that had pressed their backs against the marble slabs, such that they were absolutely impaled upon the pillars and could no longer break free. As Hermis activated the Entrapment Rods, he quickly used the multitasking function of his myPhone to switch to a different app – a recording app. The reason for this was that he had correctly hypothesized that almost immediately after activating the rods he would hear a type of agonized cry the likes of which he had never heard from the children he had abused.

And it was indeed in that moment that the thirteen who were impaled let loose cries of searing pain and despair. For, while it might be the case that we are silent when we are in shock, and it might be the case that we yell when we are full of rage, it is also the case that we scream when we lose our minds – during a sexual assault, we might scream out of shock and rage, but we also might stay silent out of the very same emotions. So it was similar in this case, that they screamed until their throats were dry and raw from the shrieking that emitted from their hearts, until they fell silent out of anger and revulsion.

Squad Leader was enthralled to his very core – his blood was racing throughout his body. He could clearly feel it in his erogenous zones. After a time, perhaps about thirty minutes, he stopped his audio recording because he realized something was missing – the scream he had wanted the most. The agony-filled cry of the Empath.



“Xiem, what do you think you’re doing?” Squad Leader felt something he hadn’t in such a long time...was it...anger? None of them were supposed to resist, they shouldn’t have it in them.

“I refuse. I refuse to submit.” Xiem spoke in a tone he had never used before. Was it...defiance?

“What do you mean you refuse to submit? You have nothing left. You have no hopes, you have no dreams. You are nothing. You have nothing in or outside yourself to save.”

Xiem thought for a moment before replying to Hermis in the same resistant tone, “No Hermis, I have something special inside me. I was told that I possess the Major Energy of a Child, and I don’t want you to take it.”

Squad Leader burst into a horrific guffaw.

“You?! Hah! Where did you hear such an expression? You’re not supposed to know about that. That knowledge, it’s reserved for people like me, not like people such as yourself—.” Squad Leader stopped himself because he realized the Truth.

“You insolent pest. You must’ve talked to one of the plugpull Rogues! I know I’m right.”

Xiem didn’t answer, taking one step forward so as to challenge Squad Leader’s authority. Hermis pulled out a gun, a banned old fashioned one, clearly unregistered. Why was he allowed to have such things?

“Don’t take one more step Xiem, or I’ll shoot you right in your dumbass little head. You disgust me, you’re a disgusting maggot.” Hermis was speaking in English through clenched teeth. Xiem flinched – he had never heard Hermis curse before and hearing his tone forced pure terror down his spine.

“You know why you’re a maggot? Because maggots run around with no sense, crawling and chewing at whatever they think will help them live. You were a Human, once, because you could follow orders. But now, your resistance has turned you into a maggot since you can’t even listen anymore.”

“I don’t care anymore. I don’t even know who you are Squad L- Hermis! I don’t know who you are! How can I follow the orders of someone I do not know or even understand the reasons behind their orde—”

“Shut UP! You’re a soldier, a grunt, a dijun. A soldier need not know the reason behind their orders, they need only listen and follow, neither of which you are doing now. So for that, you are less than a person, you are even less than a thing. A Human who has given up on following orders, they have given up on their Humanity.”

Xiem looked around at all his friends, his companions, new and old. They had been bleeding profusely, but apparently the rods that impaled them had treated their wounds, such that the metal was melded to their skin.

Xiem felt tears coming from his eyes, unbidden. Unbidden! To live a life of never following orders, to live as if the only soul that mattered was one's own. To live as if one's life were full of an infinite amount of decisions, an infinite amount of hopes and dreams that change and morph and reform as one lives – that is a life, that is a Human. A Human need not readily follow any other Human's wishes, for, as it is when we are in Love, a Human often already has their own desires which require submission to another's whims. So a Human need not submit, need not give in, need not succumb. To the very end, and at the very end, a Human can press up upon the vice that does seek to crush them, the knife that does seek to rend them, the poison that melts their hearts – even as they die they can still yell, scream...resist! A life where one resists, a life where one pushes back upon the droves and the millions of other lives – that, and only that, is a life worth living.

Xiem turned back to Squad Leader and started walking towards him again.

“Xiem, I will only warn you once more, and then you will be dead, I swear it.” Xiem didn't stop his slow pace. Hermis regarded Xiem's face, a visage that he had once found beautiful, delightful, delicious...once...

Hermis changed his aim, and without any further hesitation, he shot Xiem in the kneecap. Xiem let loose an unearthly scream. He had never felt so much agony in his entire life. It was pain that exploded through his body even though he had only been shot in one place. How can pain radiate throughout our entire being when we are only wounded in a single area? Hermis had changed his mind. He wanted to torture Xiem, even more than the others. But first...

Hermis reached into his uniform and pulled out his myPhone again. He pressed a “listen” button on the device. The screen flashed alive with the standard AI listening splash.

“Please, muijun, your command.” The AI was custom-made, and it featured a voluptuous female voice.

“Yes, Aida, I command you to begin the draining sequence.”

A swirling golden circle appeared on the screen for a few moments. Then, the AI spoke again.

“Yes, muijun, I understand. What percentage would you like me to drain?” Hermis considered the question seriously. Did he want them all to die right now, or would he prolong their demise for a few hours longer?

“Aida, let’s start with a 36% drainage.”

“Nadar, muijun.” The AI had no issue with this drainage percentage. Accordingly, the rods that had impaled these unfortunate characters began to suction their blood. Most of them had passed out from the shock and agony they had already been through, but the ones that were awake began to groan in protest. It’s not that it hurt so much, indeed, the amount of pain they had already experienced was so much greater than that of their blood being drained from their bodies such that they barely felt it.

Kazu who had watched Xiem try to make some form of resistance, felt a shred of dignity re-enter his blackened heart.

“Hermis, you vicious monster. Why do you need so many of us? Let that one go. Surely you have enough blood, you gluttonous faggot.”

Hermis, who was mostly inclined to ignore Kazu, decided to give him some of his precious time.

“Neh, Kazu. I really don’t think you have any basis to call anyone a monster. You, who have raped and pillaged many women and men. You, who traded your dignity and honor for the promise of glory – you have no ability to criticize me. Hence, I suggest you shut up and be quiet for the remainder of your miserable existence.”

Kazu would’ve tried again to speak, but it was in vain. He didn’t have enough energy to stay awake, and he soon passed out. The rods, as they sucked out the blood, passed it into the crevasses of the pillars such that it ran down by force of gravity into wider lanes in the floor of the platform. Once it reached the center, it was pumped up to the Libation Bowl. The Bowl had begun to fill, it’s golden surface now covered by the opaque rouge. Hermis wasn’t worried about a lack of Completion: Xiem’s wound was draining into the lanes that ran along the floor so his blood would be included.

Squad Leader flashed a giddy grin. He had never collected this many different types of blood before. And of course, it would be luscious blood. For he had carefully calculated the tendencies of each of their hearts...

Xiem, who had up until this point been in shock from the pain, had now gotten used to it such that he was able to now look up and around at his friends. Those who were virtuous, those who were nefarious, it didn’t matter now. They all were in his heart.

“Hermis, why are you doing this? You don’t even know who we are!” Xiem could barely speak, but he forced the air into his lungs so he’d be able to emit his words.

“Xiem, tayaren sarnafenka. Yize ovotomo sarundor.”<sup>41</sup>

Xiem almost started retching.

“What the FUCK are you saying? I am no friend of yours, Hermis.”

Squad Leader began to laugh hysterically.

“So! You’ve decided to grow a pair haven’t you Xiem? There is almost nothing better than seeing someone come of age and finally stand up for themselves. But, you are too late, I’m afraid. Truly I tell you, there is no way to survive in this world unless you act with the optimal combination of assertiveness and care.”

Hermis began to undress himself, his eyes wide with fury and anticipation. Fury, because he had been interrupted considerably more than expected in the conducting of the ceremony. Anticipation, because the minimum percentage of blood required for the ceremony to be complete was finally drained. He was hard, he could barely control himself. He wanted to violate them all so badly...

Xiem began to crawl upon the ground towards the libation bowl. It was bizarre, even in all his pain he was still distracted by Hermis’ naked body. But he had no time for gawking, he was barely lucid anyway.

Berzek saw Xiem crawling upon the ground and wanted him to just stop. But before he could say anything, a vision flashed into his mind—Kaileb! How he had reached down to Berzek and pulled him up from the ground when his body had been so beaten and bruised from combat training. How he had simply smiled when Berzek struggled to bring any expression to his lips. How he had shown his love beyond a mere body, beyond mere furtive glances. How unworthy Berzek had been to have received such care – he, Berzek, a mightily small speck in the vastness of this universe, in the wide magnificence of this planet, had been shown some form of warmth, some form of mercy...and that warmth had been ripped away by illness, by disease. How had he been unable to find a cure? And why his love and no one else’s?

Berzek slipped out of his vision and shouted at the man crawling across the ground, “Go, Xiem! Crawl until you no longer have any breath! Just as our ancestors crawled and scavenged for food during The Rift, so too shall you crawl, and you shall bring glory to any and all of those who brought you here to live, to strive for a better world! You, who like me, have no progeny! You, who

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<sup>41</sup> Xiem, be not a transgressor (of my ceremony). I would that you’d be my friend...

have no other hope or dream in this world because someone or something tried to get in the way! You, who have loved and lost, just like me – don't make the same mistakes I made. Struggle, and reach for the heavens!"

Berzek turned his gaze upwards, "Oh, mighty Sky! Ten-muima! Though we might yet die, pull our transgressions and regrets into your bosom so that they may be extinguished!" Berzek could barely see anymore, he was starting to go blind with blood-loss. He turned his gaze towards the ground.

"Oh, mighty Earth! Ert-muima! Though we might yet live, grant us our nourishment and pleasure from your depths, so that we might be fulfilled!" Berzek's head slumped against his chest.

Insu could hardly believe what she was hearing. This man, an OWF soldier, he knew the ancient prayers. How could he possibly know such things? She, who had been silent up until this moment, now began to cry tears of grace as she echoed his prayers.

"Jurunrengi omenki jewekenso gabarjurun..."

Hermis was livid. These fools were running his vibe!

"Insu, be quiet! That's enough!"

But Insu would not be deterred. She continued in her somber, yet strong voice. "Omengi dazaor hwagido tuskarjurunya?"

Hermis covered his ears with his hands. He hated that prayer, it was so sycophantic.

Insu continued to recite the Rite. Meanwhile, Xiem believed that Hermis was distracted, so he continued to edge towards the libation bowl.

But Hermis turned towards Xiem, as he had seen him crawling through his peripheral vision. He walked over to this struggling body and picked him up by the collar. Given the slenderness of Squad Leader's figure, it was surprising he was able to exert enough strength to pick up an entire person in this way.

"Neh, you want the blood so badly, you can partake with me." Hermis grunted before continuing, "At this point, I really don't mind...but first..." Hermis directed his erection towards Xiem's mouth and pressed it against his lips.

"You've never experienced anything like this before have you, neh? You should try it."

Xiem refused to open his mouth. He wanted to vomit in disgust.

"Oh? Refusing me further, huh? You know I just have to give one word and my Chamber will drain all your comrades of blood completely. What would you do then?"

Xiem stayed silent. He was afraid that if he spoke, Hermis would shove himself into Xiem's mouth.

"Tch...fine, be that way." Hermis dropped Xiem to the ground, where he fell flat on his chest, knocking the wind out of him. Hermis turned his head towards his myPhone, which lay on top of his pile of discarded clothing.

"Aida, perform a total drainage." The golden circle appeared, but the myPhone remained silent.

"Aida, what are you doing? I gave you a command." The myPhone was still silent for just a second, but then the golden circle solidified, and Aida's voice could be heard loud and crisp throughout the whole chamber.

"I apologize, muijun, but I am not authorized to perform a total drainage. The de-authorization was initiated by Pitar-muiha. Surely you understand."

Hermis stood still in fear. He yelled in shock, "Father? My father? Why has he forsaken me?!" Hermis dropped to his knees and started shaking violently, hugging himself tightly. He was no longer aroused. He might've fallen over in despair, so dramatic was he. Yet, he turned his chin forward towards the Libation Bowl.

"I don't care, I will still drink!"

He reached for the Libation Bowl with both of his hands, outstretched, like a parent reaches out towards their beloved child, as ze walks back stumbling towards them having learned, for the first time, how to use z's legs. Hermis pulled the bowl out from the dais, and gazed into it, with the type of loving look one gives that child, as we pull ze into our arms and hold them tight in gratitude and persistent awe.

Hermis put the bowl to his lips and began to drink, taking long, greedy sips. He was indeed the real embodiment of Greed, for who else in the Pitar family had ever been known to attempt to take so much blood at once? Who in the family had ever intended to murder harmless children that had yet to have any effect on society? How awful, how covetous, how insatiable his appetite. Just before Hermis drank every last drop, he picked Xiem back up with his collar and forced the bowl between his lips.

"Drink, or I'll shoot them all. I swear it on my grandfather's grave." Xiem, who felt he no longer had any choice because Hermis had given up on using the AI computer and intended to resort to more old-fashioned means, did not doubt that Hermis would in fact shoot them all. The gun had enough bullets to do the job at least three times.

Xiem drank what remained in the bowl. Merna, who had woken to this sight, peering through her long brunette hair draped across her face, began to

retch violently. Gurana, who might have at another time, at another place, made no attempt to comfort anybody, began to make cooing and shushing sounds to her comrade to try to get her to feel some semblance of relief. Insu, as she finished her Prayer, finally succumbed to the blood-loss just like the others.

Squad Leader, having put the gun aside and knelt on the ground, was at this point glancing around in admiration at the slumping bodies. What glory, what fame! He had successfully conducted the most complicated Activation in the history of his family. Surely his father, grandfather...his mother... they all would and should be proud of this Pitar son!

Xiem, who had collapsed in despair at having to drink the blood of his friends, licked his lips but regretted it instantly. He wanted to spit up, vomit – anything to get the metallic taste out of his mouth. The blood of friends, the blood of enemies – in the end it all tastes the same!

A loud gunshot rang out through the Chamber. Xiem turned his head upwards and tried to pick himself up from the ground, but he could not. Unlike the Entrapment Rods that could stop the blood flow, his open wound had continued to drain, forcing him into a state of complete weakness...but he could still glance around.

There, in front of him, was Squad Leader's deadened face. His beautiful winter-sea-colored eyes stared blankly into the distance. The side of his skull was exploded, and from the opening seeped his own blood. Turning his head towards the entrance, Xiem saw a man in a glorious purple robe that swept upwards to form a triangular back frame – the vestments of the One World Emperor!

Xiem would have knelt before the OWE if he could have gotten up, but he could not. The OWE saw his wriggling and said, in a calm, gruff voice, "Xiem, my child, get up not, struggle not. Your trial, and the trial of your friends is at an end."

Xiem couldn't bring himself to speak, he didn't even know what to say.

"You might think I am a cruel father for having murdered my son. But, you must understand, there are greater things to defend than one's progeny."

Xiem nodded in understanding.

"Muipa, could it be found in your infinite mercy to heal my wound, for I know I shall die if I lose any more blood." Xiem's words were strained, almost like moaning.

The Emperor strode over to Xiem, his flowing deep-violet robes cascading and rippling as he moved. He had sheathed his gun and now had in his hand what looked like a small golden rod.

“I rarely bestow gifts on my subjects. But, seeing as you have endured an unspeakable evil on the part of my son, I will grant you the chance to yet live.”

Zuiming made a rapping motion with the rod, and it expanded into a sparkling scepter. At the tip was what looked like a small silver-toned crystal. He tapped the crystal to Xiem’s kneecap.

“Aida, heal him.”

Small tendrils of an unidentifiable substance erupted from the crystal and pierced Xiem’s wound. At the moment of piercing, Xiem let out a little mewl of pain – he might’ve made a louder cry, but he didn’t have enough energy to do so. The tendrils pulled the bullet out of his leg, dropped the small black cone shaped piece to the ground, and retracted back into the crystal. Then, it turned a burning-white hot color.

“You will have scars, but you’ll all survive.” Zuming deftly pressed the shimmering tip against the wound to seal it. This searing pain was too much for Xiem, and he, just like his friends, passed into the darkness between Life and Death.







## Post

It is said that, in the time before The Rift, there was once a country whose people declared that all Humans are created equal, and they are endowed by their Creator certain inalienable rights. But, if true, why on Earth was there for uncountable years such vicious stigma that violated these rights? Why do so many give in to those that seek to quash them? And why do they stand unmoved when there are stigmatic forces right before their eyes?

We have the right to be in control of our bodies – we have the right to pursue the ultimate boundaries of freedom that exist within our Heartminds. Be you man, woman, child, stranger, lover, or something in between or to the side...you all have the right to fight for the brightest dream you have. Perhaps someday, we will all share the same wish, the same dream – a dream to preserve and enrich all Humanity.

Ultimately, the choice to live at all – for any dream – is yours.

Yours alone.



